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Shaping the Political Geography of the Border
The Passo della Morte and its Objects

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Abstract (Deutsch)

Grenzregime und Menschenrechtsverletzungen gegen Migrant:innen scheinen heute ein konstituierender Bestandteil der Europäischen Innen- und Außenpolitik zu sein. Grenzregionen sind mehr als nur Orte, an denen sich eine Grenze manifestiert, sondern eine fluide Landschaft der politischen Auseinandersetzung. Die Akteur:innen dieser Grenzregion sind Individuen, die in komplexe Interaktionen eintreten und im Diskurs mit Migrant:innen, Polizei, Aktivist:innen und vielen mehr den Raum um sie herum schaffen und transformieren.

In der Region um die Italienische Grenzstadt Ventimiglia kulminieren diese Prozesse seit 2014/15 auf engstem Raum und finden in besonderer Dichte an einem Wanderpfad statt, über den seit über hundert Jahren Menschen klandestin die Grenze nach Frankreich überqueren. Die tausenden Menschen, die aus verschiedensten Motivationen über diesen sog. *Passo della Morte* gingen und gehen, sind aufgrund der rechtlichen Prekarität des Unterfangens schwer greifbar, hinterlassen aber seit jeher eine Flut an Spuren in Form von Objekten, Zeichen und Markierungen. Diese *Dinge* sind nicht nur Chronisten der Ereignisse; mehr noch: sie greifen aktiv in den Diskurs ein und nehmen Anteil an der Schaffung und Transformation des Grenzregimes, welches seinen Ausdruck besonders sichtbar im Passo della Morte findet.

Die vorliegende Arbeit gründet auf insgesamt zehn Wochen teilnehmender Beobachtung, Interviews, historischer Quellenrecherche und gesammeltem visuellem Material in den Jahren 2021, 2023 und 2025. Mittels eines multi-methodischen Ansatzes soll die Rolle und Wandelbarkeit von Objekten sowie ihre Beziehungen zu menschlichen Akteur:innen behandelt werden. Besonders unter Beteiligung von Konzepten von Bruno Latour, Tim Ingold und Yael Navaro-Yashin möchte diese Forschung einen Beitrag zur sozialwissenschaftlichen Debatte um Agency, Aneignung und Teilhabe leisten.

Abstract (English)

Border regimes and human rights violations against migrants nowadays appear to be constitutive for European internal as much as foreign policy. Border regions are not to be understood as just geographical places where a border manifests itself but rather as fluid environments of political negotiation. The actors of such an environment are individuals who engage in complex interactions and hereby shape and transform the space around them. This discourse contains migrants, as well as police, activists and many more.

Since 2014/15 these processes have been intensifying in the region around the Italian border town of Ventimiglia and manifest particularly along a specific hiking trail that has been used for over a hundred years by people attempting to clandestinely cross into France. Due to the precarious situation concerning repression, those thousands of people who have been walking—and are still walking today—this so-called *Passo della Morte* are naturally difficult to reach. Yet they have been leaving a great number of traces behind consisting of objects, signs and messages all along the trail. These *things* are not just narrators of the events taking place in this space, moreover they actively engage in the discourse and partake in creating and shaping of the border regime; culminating particularly visible on the Passo della Morte.

This work at hand is built upon ten weeks of field research during the years of 2021, 2023 and 2025 consisting of participatory observation, interviews as much as studying written sources and collecting visual material. Employing a multi-methodical approach, it aims to engage with the variability of objects and their role in the relationship with human agents. Resorting particularly to the works of Bruno Latour, Tim Ingold and Yael Navaro-Yashin, this research seeks to contribute to the socio-scientific debate around notions of agency, appropriation and participation.

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Yet the biggest gratitude and admiration must go to those who on a daily basis manage to turn hostile spaces livable, who tear down walls and construct bridges by using their minds and bodies alike. May it be the sharing of knowledge, the cooking of curry or but the mere walking on your feet. It is your action which will ultimately bring an end to all border fences and I hope this work can be worthy of your struggles.

Content

1. Introduction 1
2. Landscapes of the border 3
2.1.1. The Closure of the Border 5
2.1.2. Constructing Jurisdiction 7
2.2. Ventimiglia - A Town shaped by the Border 13
2.2.1. Systems of Solidarity and Hostility 17
2.3. Actors, Agents and Agendas 21
2.4. The Passo della Morte 26
3. Methodology 32
3.1. Participant Observation 32
3.1.1. Cooking Curry at the border 33
3.1.2. Hanging out at Upupa 34
3.1.3. Returning to Ventimiglia 35
3.2. Walking along the Path 37
3.3. Recorded Interviews 39
3.4. Visual Material 40
3.5. Literature Research 41
4. The Anthropologist's Role in the Field 42
4.1. Science and Activism 42
4.2. Science and Ethics. 45
5. The Border, Agency and Power 47
5.1. How to approach it theoretically? 47
5.2. A Road without Movement? 52
5.3. How the Social shapes the Object 55
5.4. How the Object shapes the Social 59
5.5. Creating the Environment 64
6. Objects and Infrastructure of the Passo 71
6.1. Scraps of Paper and other Documents 72
6.1.1. Stuck between Systems 77
6.2. Clothing and Everyday Items 81
6.2.1. Coding and Symbolism of the Ordinary 86
6.3. Maps, Messages and Signs 90
6.3.1. Malinformation and Knowledge 95
7. The Passo della Morte as a Site of Negotiation 100
8. Conclusio 107
9. References 109
9.1. Literature 109
9.2. Web Sources 117
9.3. Interviews 121
9.4. Images 121

1. Introduction

Along the southeastern frontier between Italy and France, there is a mountain pass called Passo della Morte which offers a way across the border while possibly bypassing police controls. Colored Signs painted on various objects like trees or stone walls appear to indicate the safest route along the gorge and across the border. However, among them misleading markings are to be found as well; some pointing in the wrong direction, some even leading toward the abyss. Messages of solidarity from activists exist alongside deterrents and warnings. In addition to these signs, the path is plastered with an astonishing amount of litter. Yet, upon closer inspection, this "litter" reveals itself as hundreds of personal belongings left behind by those attempting to cross: T-shirts, toothbrushes, and even documents from the Italian and French border authorities scattered along the trail. These objects are not merely traces of the people who left them behind; they tell stories and by that they even partake in shaping the space itself. This path appears as a site of complex discourses and layered emotions. Anyone walking attentively through the streets of the nearby town of Ventimiglia can sense how present the issue of the border is; an atmosphere that becomes even more palpable on the Passo della Morte.

In my master's thesis, I aim to examine this place and the discourses negotiated within it. To do so, I traveled to the region multiple times and engaged with the path in a variety of ways. I collaborated with activists and spoke with numerous individuals involved in the current crisis in one way or another. I gathered sentiments, opinions, experiences, as well as audio and video material. The Passo della Morte is used by a wide array of actors—each with vastly different motivations. This is precisely how I intend to conceptualize the place. Migrants, or rather: *people on the move* who successfully complete the crossing, for instance, remain difficult to grasp, as they reach France and continue their journey. At the same time, I do not wish to focus excessively on a particularly marginalized group or merely recount narratives of suffering. Instead, I aim to center my final analysis on the notions of discourse, conflict and appropriation. Ultimately, I wish to explore how all actors involved shape the space simultaneously, or rather *collectively*, against the resistance of others. To this end, beyond the numerous conversations I conducted, I placed a particular emphasis on the objects I encountered in abundance along the path. These objects are highly present along the Passo della Morte and hold significant scientific interest. Accordingly, I will dedicate several chapters of my final thesis to their analysis, employing a range of anthropological theories, such as prominent debates concerning agency going back to Bruno Latour as well as Tim

Ingold. In terms of grasping the relation of objects and their transformation, I will build on the important works of Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff, who applied the concept of ascribing biographies to apparently lifeless things. In order to approach the affective and therefore political impacts objects have on border lands, I will heavily rely on Yael Navaro-Yashin's research. Discussing various notions of mobility and infrastructure as a concept offering a substructure for said interaction and transformation our actors go through, ultimately Mark B. Salter as well as Brian Larkin will come into play. Finally, this thesis, as much as many of the works mentioned above, are ultimately built upon the paradigm of the *rhizome* prominently introduced by Felix Guattari and Gille Deleuze as well as reflections about agency and society by Michel Foucault.

In order to do so, a first glimpse of the region itself, which provides the ground for further exploration, will be necessary. Therefore, the second chapter of this work will be dedicated to the crisis' political background (2.1.), its structural environment (2.2.), the actors engaging in it (2.3.) and to the Passo della Morte itself (2.4.) which will ultimately be the geographical focus of this thesis. In a second step, the course of my research and within every phase of my fieldwork will be narrated (3.1.) right before I present the methods I employed, which consist of physically exploring the path (3.2.), conducting interviews (3.3.), collecting visual material (3.4.) and acquiring a sufficient body of literature (3.5.). After a short discussion about the ethnic implications of exploring a field of such precarity in the fourth chapter, I will aim to provide a theoretical framework for the analysis of my data in the following part. This framework will encompass a discussion of the relation between human and non-human actors and their impact on producing agency, first by introducing the actor-network-theory by Bruno Latour in part 5.1. In the succeeding part, I will be leading over to the concept of Tim Ingold, who complemented the debate about agency with a rather fluid grasp on interaction. Chapters 5.3 and 5.4. will then inquire on the reciprocal relationship of both living and non-living actors, before finally demonstrating how all of these factors collectively influence the production of the environment this thesis is built on in part 5.5. The final section of this work will focus on the objects which stand out at the Passo della Morte and merge these findings with the knowledge gained during the preceding theoretical discussion, as well as concerning their background in terms of the Ventimiglia crisis. Part 6.1. will be dedicated to documents and what they might narrate about the political background of the situation, part 6.2. will dwell on the relationship between objects of daily use and the structural environment of the territory beforemoving to discussing the connection between signs and markers found at the path and the distribution of knowledge among actors in the Ventimiglia region in part 6.3.

Finally, a concluding debate concerning what might emerge from this research will follow in the final chapter of this work (7.). To sum it up, I aim to investigate in depth the ongoing discourses and processes around power dynamics along the Passo della Morte, in order to tackle the question:

What role do objects play in the appropriation of politically contested border regions?

2. Landscapes of the border

Starting in the center of the Italian heartland, the Strada Statale no.1, which also bears the illustrious name Via Aurelia, leads along the coast up to the southwestern most foothills of the Ligurian Alps. It passes through the town of Ventimiglia, comes across a quite picturesque coastal environment nestled between the Alps and the sea with several historical settlements along the road and finally heads towards the French border. The Via Aurelia is used by commuters, tourists and sport cyclists alike who witness a breathtaking view over steep cliffs and the Mediterranean Sea with the coastal town of Menton appearing in the background. In clear weather, travelers can even discover the silhouette of Monte Carlo, when moving towards the west. To their right, the serpentine road is confined by a steep rocky slope with trees and Mediterranean villas leading up the hillside. Eventually, they will drive across a surprising number of people in often well-worn clothes dragging luggage behind them who are—coming from the border—heading east towards Ventimiglia. Continuing to travel along the road, one will finally arrive at said border and find oneself surrounded by a surprising amount of police and military. Each day, up to 150 people's attempt to cross into France ends right here at the *zone d'attente*—the detention center of the French border authorities.

However, to avoid getting controlled, one could also turn right at the village of Grimaldi right before reaching the frontier. A bit further up the hillside, a narrow path winds along a gorge, ascending to a cliff before reaching a border fence. On the other side of this barrier, the path meanders downward into the French town of Menton. Said *Passo della Morte* has been used as an escape route for over a hundred years; around the turn of the century by Italian socialists fleeing state repression (cf.: Barnabà. 2018: 23), later by Austrian Jews seeking refuge from fascism, and after the war, by Soviet dissidents heading westward (Ibid.: 39). Today, it remains a route traveled daily and in every season by those who have either crossed the Mediterranean to reach Europe or endured the hardships of the Balkan route. Alongside them,

passeurs—human traffickers or other sorts of facilitators, guide some of them across the treacherous terrain for a fee.

Due to its proximity to France, the history of the landscape around Ventimiglia has long been shaped by the border—and, consequently, by the conflicts that arise from it. Yet, in 2015, the region gained further international attention: Amid the increased migration to and throughout Europe that year, and under the pretext of counterterrorism, France began suspending the Schengen Agreement as early as late 2014 and instead started to implement strict border controls along its frontier with Italy (cf.: European Commission (1)). Alternative routes for crossing the border were then identified and developed, which—in turn—led to an increased presence of police and military forces. Authorities soon adopted a systematic practice of daily pushbacks. As a result, an increasing number of people from across the world found themselves stranded in the city of Ventimiglia. Since official structures failed to provide basic support for migrants in precarious conditions, a vast network of informal infrastructures rapidly emerged, spanning both the local population and newly arrived communities. Smuggling and underground economies, but also voluntary assistance and political activism, have since intensified; each attempting, in different ways, to tackle the situation. Precarity and therefore solidarity, have become integral to the cityscape, shaping the discourses within and *around* Ventimiglia.

The enforcement of European migration law, as well as agreements regarding border regulations between the states of Italy and France often manifest themselves through direct rejections of migrating people from the French border region back to Italy. Activists in the area refer to these actions as *pushbacks*. In practice, this means that people on the move, apprehended within a 20 km radius of the border, are subjected to identity checks which then almost always results in detention (cf.: Donadio. 2021: 117; Giliberti. 2021: 208). The closing of the border and the often violent rejection of migrating people lead to a transformation of the whole landscape, which can be witnessed everywhere in the region of Ventimiglia. Consequently, the Passo della Morte, as a means of overcoming the border regime, has naturally to be approached in the context of said crisis. Therefore, a closer look at the wider implications of the situation at the border is necessary before we can inquire further about the path itself.

2.1.1. The Closure of the Border

Most people on the move I spoke to used public infrastructure to arrive in the area and continued via such means traveling towards France right away. However, according to my research, it appears that a greater part of these people were not perfectly informed concerning what awaits them once they engage in crossing the border (cf.: Aru. 2022: 1422; cf.: Bonnin. 2021: 81f).

The situation in this specific border region is highly unique, as it represents a stalemate in multiple respects. At the level of international and supranational politics, two founding members of the European Union are involved, both bound by national law, as well as EU law, and bilateral agreements. It is not surprising that international jurisdiction often comes into conflict with the national self-interests of these countries (cf.: Donadio. 2021: 101). Nor should it be unexpected that both sides find ways to minimize their fulfillment of obligations toward neighboring states while technically remaining within the legal framework of the agreements (cf.: Meiler. 2015). These conflicts result in a shockingly high number of pushbacks every day.

> *"The Italian extreme right claims the French to be enemies since they reject the migrants, while we [the Italians] remain responsible for them. [...] That is nothing but anti-French propaganda! [...] Ultimately, the French do exactly the same as the Italians do at Gorizia and at Trieste!*" (Interview with E. Barnabà)

However, the underlying juridical apparatus and particularly the concrete processes of these border laws and agreements are rather complicated to grasp. The reasons for this are certainly to be explored in the lack of clear regulation when it comes to the individual act of entry refusal, combined with some sort of structural improvisation acted out by the officers in charge. Inquiring a bit deeper into this procedure and the juristic frameworks it relies on can therefore be quite enlightening when attempting to contextualize said action on the border. On the following pages I aim to delve a bit deeper into the processes conducted at the border, as well as their legal backgrounds:

When I first spoke with people who had just experienced a pushback and recounted their stories to me in 2021, I was shocked. The brutality of the European border enforcement machinery is, to be sure, structurally inherent to its very nature (cf.: Da-Boi. 2021: 3), and—at least among those who follow the news from time to time—widely known. What struck me, however, was the systematic execution of a practice that appeared to me to be entirely illegal yet was carried out by a legal apparatus at an astonishing frequency. I was equally taken aback

by the apparent normalization of these procedures, which seemed to be conducted on a daily basis with little hesitation or scrutiny.

Toni, an activist I asked about his personal perception concerning this specific border situation remarked that "[...] *especially when it comes to Fortress Europe; all borders are somehow absurd, but there it is different; so the absurdity, or the perversion was, I think, different from how I know it from the Balkan route.*" (Interview with Toni)

Even individuals who had just emerged from the *zone d'attente*, as well as activists awaiting them at the so-called Border Spot along the Via Aurelia, repeatedly expressed confusion and dismay at the conduct of the French police (and, to a somewhat lesser degree, their Italian counterparts). Their practices appeared to stand in stark contradiction to the legal frameworks established by the Schengen Agreement of the European Union, as well as to the right to seek asylum as enshrined in the Geneva Convention; protections which, notably, ought to remain valid despite the Dublin Regulation. For a more thorough discussion of the legal foundations underpinning these procedures, I would like to recommend the comprehensive text by Giacomo Donadio (2021), to which I will refer repeatedly in the following. While the legal dimensions can only be outlined here, a basic engagement with this framework is essential for understanding the infrastructural contradictions that have given shape to—and indeed exacerbated—the ongoing crisis in and around Ventimiglia. If it is established during a French police identity check that the individual had previously been registered in Italy, it would inevitably lead to detention. In this case, the individual will be taken to the police detention center—the *zone d'attente* mentioned above—located directly at the border on the cliffside between Ventimiglia and Menton. Among people on the move and activists, this center is commonly referred to as the "container." After an arrest, which can last until the morning of the next day, people are treated for identification purposes and then sent on foot to the border post controlled by Italian authorities. After yet another arrest followed by more identification processes, the captives are released once more only to be then forced to walk back all the way to Ventimiglia along the Via Aurelia past the tourists and cyclists mentioned earlier.

Between February and August 2023, Medicines Sans Frontiers documented 13,395 people being pushbacked - leading to an average number of 80 pushbacks per day (cf.: Medicines sans Frontières. 2023: 13). During my second stay in 2023, the groups monitoring the border reported as many as 100 to 150 pushbacks per day. Following this, one activist hypothesized that there might be a connection between the intensity of border controls as well as deportations and the number of landings by people on the move along the Italian coast. In the

weeks leading up to this period, the weather had been relatively clear, crossing the Mediterranean might have appeared less risky. While the data is insufficient to establish causality, it is worth noting that, according to UNHCR figures, an average of 12,111 people reached the Italian coast each month during the MSF data collection period from February to June 2023. In August 2022—the month of my second field stay—that number went up to 16,816 people (cf.: UNHCR (1)), which could indicate increased migration towards France. The duration of detention in the container can range from a few hours to overnight. People who were a bit more familiar with the procedure at the border advised against attempting border crossings too late in the day, as being detained at this time would likely result in spending the entire night in that place. This experience was consistently described as extremely unpleasant by everyone I spoke to.

It is important to note that such procedures appeared to be geographically constrained. Conversations with people on the move and activists suggested that such pushbacks occur only within a 20 km radius of the border as mentioned earlier (cf.: Giliberti. 2021: 208). If individuals manage to break through this radius and continue their journey, for example to Nice, the likelihood of a direct, unchallengeable deportation seems significantly lower. However, if individuals end up being controlled and detained inside this radius - even if they managed to arrive in Menton right behind the physical border, they would be brought back to said container. One reason this is worth mentioning is that successfully crossing the border—by walking the Passo della Morte for instance—would not prevent people from being pushed back. Rather, the difficulties would often only start on the other side of the fence.

2.1.2. Constructing Jurisdiction

At the French-Italian border, a multitude of legal frameworks and bilateral agreements operate simultaneously; each the result of evolving negotiations, amendments, extensions, or suspensions over time. Foremost among these is the Schengen Agreement, established in 1985, which was intended to dismantle internal European border controls while promoting cooperative border management between member states (cf.: European Union. 1985: Art 1, Art 2, Art 8, Art 9). Nevertheless, systematic checks are carried out at various locations in the French town of Menton, along regional roads, and across the so-called *green border*, including at the Passo della Morte. These border controls, which constitute a suspension of Schengen regulations, have been renewed on a monthly basis since 2014. While such renewals are technically permissible, their legal basis remains contentious (Donadio. 2021:

115). The reinstatement of controls by the French state is officially justified by the alleged threat of terrorism:

> "*Serious threats to public policy, public order, and internal security posed by high-level terrorist activities, the growing presence of criminal networks facilitating irregular migration and smuggling, and migration flows that risk infiltration by radicalised individuals, as well as the irregular crossings on the Channel and North Sea borders, along with rising violence among migrants* [...]." (cf.: European Commission (1))

Even beyond the French border, within the town of Ventimiglia itself, it quickly becomes apparent that not only do various units of the Italian police conduct checks on presumed people on the move, but French officers are also visibly active. At first glance, this might appear to contradict the principle of Italian state sovereignty. However, it can be explained by the presence of a so-called *Police and Customs Cooperation Center* in Ventimiglia, which enables cross-border collaboration between law enforcement agencies of both countries. This cooperation is grounded in the 1997 Chambéry Agreement, which provides a framework for closer collaboration in matters of irregular migration and establishes the possibility of readmission or re-deportation from France to Italy (European Commission (2). 2024: 9; Borghezio. 2003). However, the Chambéry Agreement alone cannot fully account for the specific procedures employed by border officials, as these are governed by a set of regulations which interestingly remain notably informal. To enact a return—respectively: a deportation—it must be demonstrated both that individuals have no legitimate claim to asylum and secondly that they have previously spent time in Italy. Both conditions require a legal process and, consequently, verifiable evidence; which is, unsurprisingly, difficult to produce (Donadio. 2021: 120f). Moreover, this agreement only allows for deportation to Italy if the person in question has not spent more than six months on French territory, which logically incentivizes the border regime to carry out the procedure as swiftly as possible.

A further mechanism worth mentioning is the so-called *Refus d'Entrée*: a document that, during my fieldwork in 2021 and 2023, I frequently observed in the hands of people leaving the border police container (regardless of whether they were people on the move or Passeurs). Copies of this document were also scattered along the Passo della Morte. This double-sided printed paper makes no reference to bilateral or supranational law but instead cites French immigration law—specifically Articles L213-1 and L213-2—which allows for immediate refusal of entry at the border (cf.: République Française. 2020). The 2019 amendment to this

law expanded its scope to include individuals who had previously entered via another Schengen country (in most cases, Italy) or via a land-based internal border (such as the Passo della Morte), highlighting how French legislation has adapted to the specific context of Ventimiglia (Donadio. 2021: 117). Those who carry this paper with them after a pushback often appear visibly shaken. The procedure enacted by the French police is experienced as arbitrary and intimidating. The justification for such controls and arrests is routinely framed as the protection of the French nation against terrorism; a deeply unsettling accusation for someone simply seeking employment in Paris. At the same time, I also witnessed how activists at the border would advise individuals to seek legal counsel via local organizations such as Caritas, while simultaneously working to demystify and de-escalate the fear surrounding the document. Although these procedures are, to some extent, legally grounded in national and bilateral frameworks, they often rest on precarious foundations.

Most of the people on the move I spoke to had previously attempted to cross the border by train without success and were planning to try again; partly due to the region's well-developed long-distance rail infrastructure, which is widely used by commuters and tourists alike (cf.: Bonnin. 2021: 81). However, systematic controls are conducted at various points along the first railway stations of the line running from Ventimiglia through Menton toward Monaco and Nice. French police officers board the trains, walk through carriages, open toilet compartments, and check identification documents. Notably, identity checks are not carried out uniformly among all passengers but are instead conducted selectively, based on appearance and racialized categories (Ibid.: 87). This practice of conducting identity checks based on racial profiling is, of course, in direct conflict with the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*, which France has ratified (cf.: Human Rights Watch. 2024; cf.: MCDS, et al. 2024: 9) and is therefore difficult to justify in legal terms. This tension is symptomatic of a broader issue within the border regime operating between Ventimiglia and Menton: While the Schengen Agreement does allow for the



Figure 1

temporary reintroduction of border controls under exceptional circumstances and for limited periods, the ongoing monthly extensions of this suspension since 2015 are legally questionable (Donadio. 2021: 116). Similarly, although the Chambéry Agreement permits the swift return of apprehended individuals to Italy, the burden of proof required for such actions is exceedingly difficult to meet (Donadio. 2021: 121).

All legal procedures at the border—as well as the laws and agreements they are based on—are, in principle, bound by the imperative to protect the individual rights of those affected. These include the right to legal counsel and translation, the right to be informed of one's legal status, and, crucially, the right to apply for asylum (cf.: Anafé (1)). The evaluation or potential rejection of an asylum claim requires time. Additionally, it must be legally established which Schengen country is responsible for processing the application, as per the Dublin Regulation (Donadio. 2021: 122, 127). Yet, most of the pushbacks I witnessed occurred after periods of detention that lasted mere hours. It is thus reasonable to question whether these actions can be carried out in a procedurally correct and lawful manner. Moreover, many individuals described detention conditions in the border police container as deeply precarious; ranging from lack of water and food, denial of medical attention, to physical violence by officers. These conditions starkly contradict Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which requires that legal treatment take place under humane conditions (cf.: Council of Europe. 1950: 7). The actors executing arrests and pushbacks face a structural contradiction: they are expected to conduct removals swiftly but should also establish legal grounds through thorough investigation. The incompatibility of these demands results in a practice that resembles systematic collective expulsion; an act prohibited under Article 4 and Article 19(1) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (European Parliament. 2000: 9, 12).

In summary, the legal architecture governing the 20 km zone around the border relies on a meshwork of laws and regulations that are only partially implemented. Some of these provisions contradict one another, and several have been repeatedly contested. In some cases, the system has been judicially legitimised, as in 2017 by the *Conseil d'État* (cf.: Donadio. 2021: 116). In other instances it has been called into question, as in 2019 and 2023 by the European Court of Justice (Donadio. 2021: 125; Dylla. 2023). Actors who advocate for the opening of the border—or seek to challenge the border regime in a more broad sense—find themselves navigating a deeply contentious system. But the same applies in a way for state

agents who are tasked with reproducing this system daily through their sheer presence and their duties.

In the past, I considered it likely that the violence at the border could be attributed mostly to the Dublin Regulation. Now it appears instead that a stricter enforcement of Dublin III might even improve the situation for people on the move, as it upholds the right to apply for asylum (cf.: Donadio. 2021: 127). During this process, applicants must be accommodated and granted a set of rights, including access to legal representation and translation, the formal right to lodge an asylum application, and protection against deportation within the first 24 hours (cf.: Anafé (1)). The fact that the vast majority of people on the move I spoke with reported not having received these rights during their stay in the container is therefore difficult to reconcile from a legal perspective.

At their core, these pushbacks are rooted in legal institutions. They involve routine procedures, official documents, and regulations bound by law. While these enable the act of pushbacks itself, they do as well establish certain rights for those affected, such as for instance the entitlement to a translator and the possibility to apply for asylum. Only then would a negative determination on an asylum application in France theoretically justify (again from a juristic point of view) a rejection. From an anthropological perspective, this process can be seen not merely as an act of arbitrariness but as an institutionalized procedure. Even the controlled violation of rules adheres to a set of guidelines that law enforcement actors maintain to some extent. According to Yael Navaro-Yashin this practice of normalizing abnormal behaviour by legalizing obviously illegal acts seems constitutional for any state-centered international system. Consequently, it is up to anthropological research "[...] *to become aware of 'the abnormal' that underlies what is presented as 'normal' in such discourses*." (Navaro-Yashin. 2003: 115)

How can such a system of systematic illegality—coexisting, paradoxically, with legal frameworks—be implemented and reproduced across thousands of state agents, remains a question worthy of further systematic research. Victims of pushbacks, as well as open-border-activists, frequently reported that the degree of brutality or, conversely, the procedural correctness (from a legal perspective) of their treatment often depended on which officers happened to be on duty and what their mental disposition happen to be at the time. The informality of top-down directives (cf.: Donadio. 2021: 130) inevitably necessitates a high degree of individual improvisation and the creative adaptation of legal and technical infrastructures that are available, yet insufficient. The idea of representatives of a state

executive having to improvise while executing law might seem a bit counterintuitive, yet it gains more sense when considered in the light of Michel Foucault's argument that the modern state is not to be perceived as "[...] *entity which was developed above individuals, ignoring what they are and even their existence, but in the contrary as a very sophisticated structure, in which individuals can be integrated under one condition: that this individuality would be shaped in a new form, and submitted to a set of very specific patterns*." (Foucault. 1983: 214)

Consequently, it is imperative to keep in mind that although this research is inquiring into great structures and events that scale beyond the individual, the actual tangible action is nevertheless always carried out by subjects and objects on the ground. This applies both to those working to facilitate border crossings and to those attempting to prevent them. This outsourcing of international policy to the adaptability and creativity of specific executive bodies or even individual officers allows room for actors with opposing interests. Some groups of activists focus on monitoring the border to document illegal pushbacks and violations of the law by authorities. Groups like *Kesha Ni*ya, *Progetto20K*, and *No Name Kitchen* collaborated on these efforts and periodically published individual reports on public platforms. Others, such as the group *Roya Citoyien*, have collected material to bring cases of legal violations by French officers and soldiers before a French court.

Finally, in autumn 2023 the European Court of Human Rights' deemed the previous practices of the French authorities unlawful (cf.: DYLLA. 2023). Some activists I talked to in 2025 explained that for a period of time border police refrained from detaining people and would rather "wave them through". However, the activists went on saying that the police managed to adapt once more to the system and the border returned to being basically closed for migrating people. In the future, more inquiry on the issue of current legislation on the border could prove interesting to approach the inherent logic (if there is one) of border regimes. But for now, we shall proceed with the results of my past field research:

After a pushback groups of people leave French territory on foot and pass through the Italian border checkpoint. As mentioned above, they undergo yet another waiting period and another round of identity checks. Only then does the process conclude, allowing those released to either walk back to Ventimiglia on their own or hope that a bus will stop at the station. If one of the activist groups operating in the area is engaged in monitoring during that moment, at least information about spots of solidarity inside the town can be provided. In any case, for many people on the move, traveling to Ventimiglia will be the next necessary step to obtain support in the form of basic supplies before eventually embarking on another attempt.

2.2. Ventimiglia - A Town shaped by the Border

> *"For a long time, particularly after the improvement of the Schengen acquis, the town has been a kind of ghost place, an invisible and unnoticed transit place for different flows: it used to work, regularly and invisibly, mainly as a logistical node Yet, recent events,[...] have in a way lightened up that place, transforming Ventimiglia into a (in)visible scene of passage and capture (as a creep, a kind of battleground) and often projecting it almost at the core of Italian political debate, as well as at the core of the border relations between Italy and France."* (Palmas, Rahola. 2021: 231)

Reaching the center of Ventimiglia takes about two to three hours on foot from the zone d'attente at the border. Most of the individuals I met at the border spot, after being pushed back, followed the Via Aurelia eastward and arrived in a town whose political discourse is profoundly shaped by its proximity to the border. The name "Ventimiglia" has come to symbolize not only the tensions between EU border regimes with the Union's own human rights framework but also the precarity of those stuck in between. According to data compiled by the group United for Intercultural Action network, 45 people on the move have lost their lives in the context of the border closure between 2016 and 2024 (cf.: United. 2024). Yet migrants keep finding themselves stranded in the street of this small coastal town, while continuing with their attempts to reach France. Precise figures are difficult to determine, but statistics from the local Caritas office suggest a significant decline in arrivals since November 2023, following a peak of 2,774 registered individuals in September of that year. Current figures hover between 100 and 200 newly registered arrivals each month (cf.: Odv Caritas Intemelia Onlus: Monthly statistics). As a central node of intra-European and transcontinental migration, the region also carries a long and complex history of bordering regimes:

> "*Since the onset of the Italian nation-building project, Ventimiglia has constituted an important "gate" for people from southern Italy, the Balkans, former communist republics, North Africa and the Middle East, completing their migration route to Europe*." (Proglio. 2021: 30)

In terms of infrastructure, the territory on both sides of the frontier is well connected. The region is conveniently accessible via public transportation from Italy's major urban centers and possesses its own network of buses and trains, which operate both inland and across the

border into France. Its location between the sea and the river valleys of Liguria offers breathtaking landscapes that attract both tourists as well as people from various countries seeking alternative lifestyles closer to nature. Its proximity to France further amplifies this dynamic: around 6,000 commuters travel daily from coastal areas of Italy into France and Monaco and around 300 make the journey in the opposite direction (La Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière. 2010). Cross-border infrastructural cooperation is well developed and facilitates not only the movement of workers but also a large number of French citizens seeking lower prices in Italy.

What is particularly noteworthy, however, is not only the region's internal infrastructure, but also its positioning within the broader network of European long-distance transportation. Locked in between the sea and the Alps, the region offers relatively few natural border crossings (Amigoni, Palmas. 2023: 1057). As a result, Ventimiglia has become a key junction for long-distance travelers, whether by car or train. Concerning migration, Ivan Bonnin argues that the city and its infrastructural positioning may themselves constitute one of the reasons why so many people on the move use this particular route when traveling further north or west (Bonnin. 2021: 81f).

The specific placement of the borderline—and the people it included or excluded—has been a contentious issue for centuries between various governments of France, Italy, and Monaco, as well as their respective historical predecessors. These disputes were never merely about territorial claims but also involved questions of identity and belonging for those directly affected by shifting borders, many of whom actively engaged in struggles around them (cf.: Rinauro. 2021). With the consolidation of the border as part of the formation of nation-states, formal records on smuggling and the apprehension of smugglers also began to increase; particularly from the early 20th century onward. According to Gabriele Proglio, sources from this period show that both those who paid to cross the border and those who facilitated such crossings often held Italian citizenship. Notably, many of these early smugglers had personal migration backgrounds themselves, typically from southern Italy (2021: 24). These dual identities possessed by many of the actors around the border as migrants and entrepreneurs constitutes one of various parallels to today's situation. Consequently, I argue that it can be rather fruitful to dwell a little on some of the developments, pathways and struggles that partook in forming the region's history and—if you will—identity:

Of particular importance I would identify the period of European fascism, during which thousands of mostly Austrian Jews sought refuge in Italy to escape the terror of the Nazi

regime. However, the enactment of the *REGIO DECRETO-LEGGE 7 settembre 1938-XVI, n. 1381* marked the beginning of their systematic expulsion and deportation (Veziano. 2016: 221). What stands out is a pattern that runs through the history of this border and echoes throughout this thesis: the ambivalence of bilateral relations and internal contradictions within national political systems. Although Mussolini had already closed the border with France and forcefully pursued the expulsion of Jewish refugees, not even five months after the decree, the Italian state introduced a six-month tourist visa, significantly easing access for thousands of refugees. Furthermore, on January 28, 1939, prefectures were instructed by Rome to actively assist in facilitating their departure (Ibid.: 223). At the same time, various actors—some profit-driven, others less so—emerged to support and enable escape. Authorities alternated between leniency and interference in these processes. Even at this time, the formation of informal networks and communication within imagined or institutional communities proved crucial. Eventually, the French government intensified its border surveillance along the southern Alps, which in the summer of that year brought this specific collaboration between border agents and Jewish people on the move to an end (Veziano. 2016: 225). With the outbreak of war between France and Germany, controls were tightened further, and those who had crossed clandestinely into France via Ventimiglia were interned in camps. However, by that time, an estimated 4,500 to 5,000 people had successfully crossed the border (Ibid.: 228f).

Throughout all of this, a formal legal relationship persisted between the neighboring states; one governed by laws and bilateral agreements, which even when circumvented in practice was not officially breached until the outbreak of the war. Police and militia beholden to fascist Italy, in turn, found themselves caught between Italian and French law as well as the contradictory task of facilitating border crossings, and lastly their own desire to supplement their income. The result, as Paolo Veziano writes, was the emergence of a "state-sanctioned smuggling organization" that actively guided people on the move toward mountain passes such as the Passo della Morte (Ibid.: 224). To illustrate this argument, Veziano points to the map in Figure, which illustrates some of the dynamics of the border during the Italian fascist period. It depicts border posts on both sides of the Passo della Morte which suggests that at least the Italian side had knowledge of the path being used for border crossings. This might in turn indicate occasional cooperation between state officials and migrants in this area.

After the war, Ventimiglia remained a transit point for refugees; now primarily for people fleeing across the Iron Curtain into the West (Barnabà. 2018: 39). While the gradual expansion of the Schengen Agreement reduced the number of people stranded in the city, the

conflict at the border has intensified again over the past 15 years. Following the Arab Spring, the number of people arriving in Ventimiglia while in flight increased and in 2011, an irregular camp was established by migrants (Proglio. 2021: 24). While only lasting for a couple of weeks, it was the first informal camp in a long series of such settlements which only a few years later came to shape the cityscape of Ventimiglia pretty significantly. To understand the present situation, particular attention must be paid to the formation of both informal and formal camps following the border closure which persists until today. The latter began in 2014 and, both then and now, was justified by concerns over terrorist attacks; as mentioned above. A couple of months later, on June 13, 2015, the so-called *No Border Camp* beneath the San Ludovico bridge was established. It was a spontaneous, informal collective of local and international activists together with stranded people on the move. This occupation, consisting of dozens of tents adjacent to the "Lower Border" right underneath the Passo della Morte, remained until the end of September when its inhabitants were evicted by police (Meiler. 2015, Euzen. 2015).

Beyond its strong symbolic resonance—arising from the cooperation of people from diverse international backgrounds, which brought temporary global media attention to the city—the camp also fulfilled a series of rather concrete practical functions: As a result of the infrastructure of the camp, hundreds of people were able to cross the border during this period (Proglio. 2021: 29). Additionally, the communal organized incidents unfolding at the border

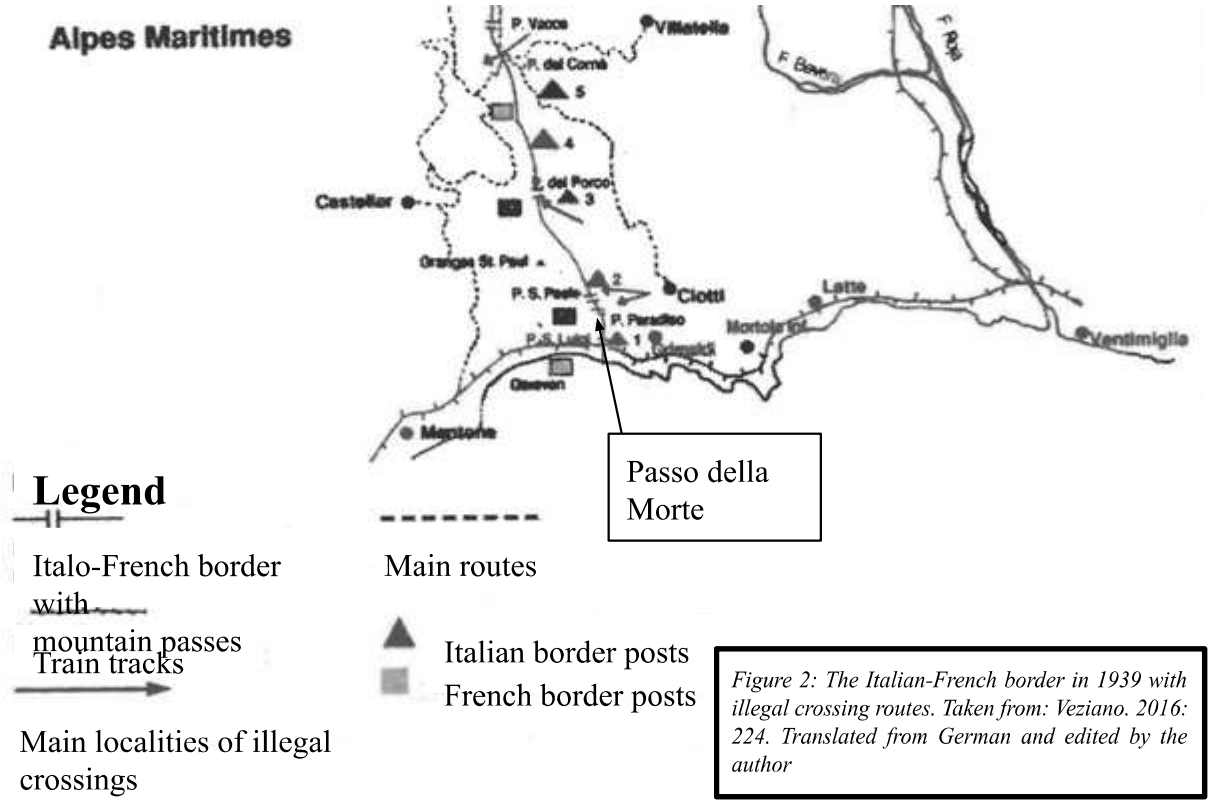


Figure 2: The Italian-French border in 1939 with illegal crossing routes. Taken from: Veziano. 2016: 224. Translated from German and edited by the author

brought something akin to a political activation to the region. Today, one can observe a striking number of political initiatives and communes formed by international activists in the picturesque villages surrounding Ventimiglia. Some of their members told me that they had come to Ventimiglia during said occupation and that this event appeared to have had a lasting impact on the region's political landscape.

2.2.1. Systems of Solidarity and Hostility

Today, Ventimiglia's political situation is palpable everywhere. The next police checkpoint never seems to be more than five intersections away, and both French and Italian authorities regularly patrol around the train station. On the sun-scorched sidewalks of the inner city, faces from all over the world pass by. Young French couples take romantic photos on the beach, while just a few meters away, groups of weary young men sit and wait for the moment they will finally have crossed the border. Throughout the city, one sees people who appear to have endured a long journey and who, in many cases, still have a long way ahead. Security personnel prevent individuals from using beach showers or the public water fountain at the cemetery to clean themselves.

> *"So many people were turned back at the border—illegally turned back—so that there was an enormous accumulation in these small towns. This precarity actually, or at least as I perceived it, this precarity that existed in Ventimilia, was completely artificially created."* (Interview with Toni)

The crisis that has unfolded in Ventimiglia—sometimes more intensely, sometimes less so, but always present since 2015—has left its mark on nearly all aspects of public life. Signs displayed in the windows of local businesses frequently state that customers are not allowed to charge their mobile phones inside, a rule likely reflecting the high demand from people who are currently heavily reliant on functioning internet-enabled devices. Informal camps of stranded individuals can be seen beneath bridges, and messages in various languages are painted on building walls; some expressing rejection, others support of the border. And in the midst of all this, tourism continues to thrive.

> "*For me, Ventimiglia was a kind of repository of absurdity. And furthermore, it's not a place in Europe where there's little structure. [...] This border there in particular with this good structure, with all this luxury tourism, somehow clashes a lot. And I*

think for me that is somehow also very emblematic of European politics." (Interview with Toni)

When people leave the detention center at the border after a pushback and ultimately manage to arrive in Ventimiglia, they are confronted with the reality of those vibrant contrasts on the streets of the small border town. However, the city offers them little in the way of official infrastructure to meet basic needs; beyond a pervasive sense of tension and surveillance.

After the eviction of the informal protest camp directly at the border, as well as other makeshift settlements in and around Ventimiglia (cf.: Scarfone. 2016), the Red Cross opened an institutional tent camp in 2016, which remained operational for several years. It accommodated up to 360 people and was designed to ensure that basic needs at least were met (Aru. 2021a: 1630). Interestingly, on one side it provided a space for residents to form informal networks and communities, while simultaneously rendering them more accessible to police surveillance and control on the other side[1]. In 2020, the facility was permanently closed; officially due to a decline in occupancy during the pandemic (Ibid.: 1634). In 2021, *Bar Hobbit,* a pub owned by a committed local offering space for marginalized people, suffered the same fate (cf.: Ansa. 2021). *Eufemia*, an Infopoint that distributed clothing, sleeping bags, and vital information, had already ceased operating in 2018 (cf.: Amigoni et al. 2021). Its successor and in many ways very similar project *Upupa*—where I spent time almost daily during the summer of 2023—was then closed in 2024.

By the time of my final field visit in 2025, virtually no infrastructure operated by either NGOs or activists' associations remained for stranded people in Ventimiglia. Most activist groups had withdrawn from the region, forced to pause their work due to repression or internal disputes[2]. A coalition of several collectives continues to organize a public meal each evening in the parking lot next to the former Upupa site (commonly referred to as *la distrib*), and a few times a week, activists set up makeshift showers. Aside from that, during my 2025 research, the only remaining daytime space frequented by migrants was a facility run by Caritas; now the sole publicly funded institution following the closure of the Red Cross camp. There are no accommodations available, except for a small number of beds reserved for

[1] For a more in-depth discussion of informal networking within the camp's structure, reading the whole—and it should be mentioned: rather interesting—text *Abandonment, Agency, Control—Migrants' Camps in Ventimiglia* (2021a) by Silvia Aru has to be recommended.

[2] It must be mentioned that this list of supporting groups of activists is far from being complete. Naturally many more people and institutions were or are still active around Ventimiglia, such as *Saint Antonio church, Médecins Sans Frontières*, *Roya Citoyenne* as well French or Italian locals and more. Their engagement should not be taken for granted.

women and children at said facility. People on the move are once again sleeping in informal encampments; primarily under a motorway bridge adjacent to the parking lot mentioned above.

Over the course of the last couple of years the space accessible to migrants has continually been shrinking, and even basic needs such as food, clothing, medical care, and information are no longer reliably met.[3] This is partially explicable by the trend of public opinion shifting away from migrant-friendly policies. The political landscape in Ventimiglia is deeply shaped by the current situation, exemplified by the election of a mayor from the right-wing Lega Nord (cf.: Kronthaler. 2023). Sceptic to hostile sentiment towards migrants can be heard in Grimaldi—the village at the beginning of the Passo della Morte—as well as in the streets of Ventimiglia and among residents of the villas along the Via Aurelia (cf.: Barnabà. 2024: 79). Many locals express concern over littering in public space and along the border and moreover fear a rise in petty crime associated with people on the move. Neighbors repeatedly approached the group operating Upupa expressing their concerns about the constantly high number of marginalized people lingering in front of the day center and therefore around their houses. In October 2024, the city finally issued an ordinance prohibiting any form of camping and sleeping near the said place; allegedly to prevent substance abuse and littering (cf.: Città di Ventimiglia. 2024: Ordinanza N° 145 del 23/10/2024). Some residents of Grimaldi told me they sympathized with those passing through their village on a daily basis, but at the same time expressed fears of burglary and theft. However, local historian Enzo Barnabà, who too is an inhabitant of said village and whose writings are frequently cited throughout this thesis, dismissed these claims as unfounded prejudice. Yet, he recalled that in 2015, following a community petition, the Ventimiglia authorities stationed a police car in Grimaldi, which patrolled the Via Woronoff day and night for a period, preventing migrants heading towards the Passo della Morte from passing through their commune. On one occasion, I was sitting in a café when I observed a fire breaking out under the aforementioned motorway bridge. The other guests quickly



Figure 3: "The Border kills"

[3] According to statistics of the local Caritas shelter each month on average 446 kits of clothing and hygiene products and 1824 meals were distributed during the time period between January 2024 and January 2025 (cf.: Odv Caritas Intemelia Onlus. Monthly statistics).
However, it should be noted that these figures—apart from people on the move—include homeless locals and other marginalized groups as well.

reached a consensus: the people camping beneath the bridge must be responsible. In addition to the periodic evictions of the informal bridge camps and the destruction of tents (cf.: Müssig. 2024), the use of public beach showers for daily hygiene has been prohibited, as has the collection of water from the cemetery adjacent to the bridge as indicated earlier in this chapter. When I asked Enzo Barnabà about these developments, he reacted with visible indignation:

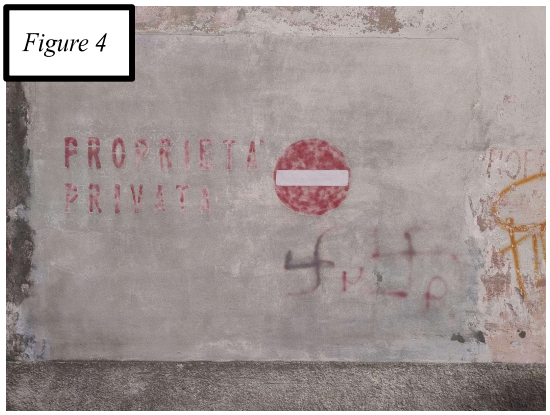
> *"The mayor prevents people from drinking at the fountain, since the only place where you can find water is at the cemetery. That is inhumane! The mayor of Ventimiglia does not behave humanely!"* (Interview with E. Barnabà)

The author then goes on adding his explanation for the municipality's decision to cut off migrants from accessing said water infrastructure:

> *"Their line of reasoning indicates that, the worse they* [people on the move] *are off, the less will come!"* (Ibid.)

The complex political situation thus demands constant adaptation; and the same applies to the numerous smugglers in the city. On the one hand, sites of solidarity such as the aforementioned *Distrib* also regularly attract entrepreneurs of all kinds. This is certainly related to the fact that many of the smugglers I encountered appeared to be living in highly precarious conditions themselves, often unhoused. But it is also linked to the simple logic that large numbers of desperate migrants gathering at one place might increase the likelihood of striking a deal. Other local actors turned to adapting current political conditions into their economic strategies as well: Several local pizzerias, for instance, operate not only in the realm of gastronomy but serve additional functions; some acting as low-threshold meeting points for entrepreneurs and potential clients[4].

Figure 4



In the streets, alleys, parking lots, beaches, and mountain paths in and around Ventimiglia, a wide range of actors encounter one another, collectively shaping the character of the region. Over the course of this thesis, I will explore how these actors enter into discourse with one another, focusing particularly on the case of the Passo della Morte. But before we proceed, let

[4] However, some of them nevertheless serve pretty good pizza.

us take a closer look at said actors, and more importantly, at the definitions that underpin them.

2.3. Actors, Agents and Agendas

The field in question is deeply infused with political discourse. Alongside the remarkable number of actors operating within it, a multitude of meaningful and often ambivalent terms circulate around it. In principle, I have chosen to adopt the vocabulary used by actors in the field themselves. It should be noted, however, that most of my informants and the people amidst whom I spent most of my research can be identified as advocates of a rather border-sceptical approach, for either personal or ideological reasons. Consequently, the wording implemented in this thesis can hardly reflect the verbiage of the general public in Ventimiglia, but rather the one used by some groups. Secondly, these groups consist of members of the political left from all over Europe who then used English as a means of internal communication and furthermore tend to be rather careful about the wording they use and its political implications. Lastly, it is important to remember that many of these terms are actively contested; at times within even one group of actors. For instance, the term *passeur*, which was the most common wording used amidst migrants and activists of various origins I encountered even though the word is notably borrowed from the French language (cf.: Amigoni, et. al. 2021: 138) can certainly serve as an example. Throughout the history of Ventimiglia, smugglers of various ideological stripes have played a crucial role (cf.: Veziano. 2016; Proglio. 2021; Barnabà. 2024). The political and economic situation at the border has always had a direct impact on both the number and the kind of passeurs operating in the territory. To the trained eye, they are ever-present in the urban landscape, and in the places where I spent time during my fieldwork, there were typically almost always people with business intentions among those present.

One reason for this is certainly that spaces of support infrastructure—often run by activists—also tend to attract people with rather ‘economic’ ambitions. On the one hand, such locations offer access to a concentration of potential clients; on the other, many of the entrepreneurs in the region are themselves in precarious circumstances and are therefore reliant on these same support systems. Just as views on passeurs varied widely among activists, there were also those who rejected the term altogether, arguing that it conflates vastly different individuals and reduces them to a single act; that of smuggling people. In

most cases the no-border activists I engaged with ultimately settled on the agreement that representatives of this group were welcome among their spaces but had nonetheless to refrain from conducting any form of *business*[5].

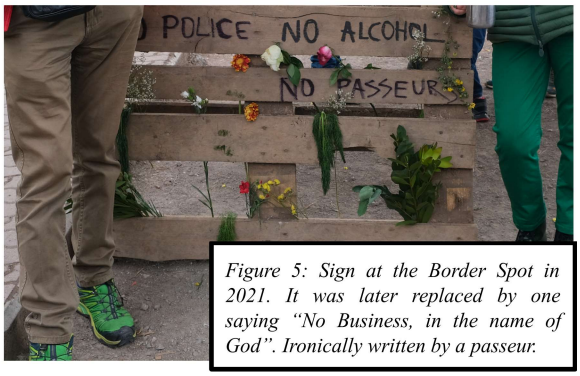


Figure 5: Sign at the Border Spot in 2021. It was later replaced by one saying "No Business, in the name of God". Ironically written by a passeur.

The activists who operate within these spaces in turn are generally international volunteers, engaged in unpaid work. Since the border closure in 2014, a wide range of groups consisting of such activists have established themselves in the region, initiating various projects in response to changing political conditions and emergent needs. Of course, not all actors in the field aim to facilitate migration; there are also those whose activism is oriented toward its prevention, such as right-wing-extremists, to point out a prominent example. Unless stated otherwise, however, I use the term *activist* in this thesis to refer specifically to those volunteers who are in support of the goals of people on the move and by that oppose most manifestations of the border regime.

It must not be forgotten that, in the near-total absence of institutional support for migrants in Ventimiglia, the basic needs of those in transit—such as food, hygiene, and information—are to a greater part met by activists organized in autonomous groups of various kinds. On both sides of this engagement (giving out versus receiving supplies), we also find people who, within the circles I was moving in, were referred to as *locals*. This term denotes residents of the region; whether on the Italian side or across the border in France. The notion of the *local* implies a kind of spatial fixation that stands in contrast to the term people on the move, which therefore also requires clarification. In this thesis, the wording *people on the move* refers to individuals who arrived in Ventimiglia in transit, are furthermore nationals of third countries, and have (at least in the past) attempted to cross the border into France. I employ this wording for several reasons:

First, *people on the move* is the term used almost exclusively among activists to refer to this large and diverse group of individuals. Since I aim to employ emic terminology throughout this thesis, the term appears frequently in the pages that follow. Secondly, the choice of this

[5] The Term *Business* was often used by people operating solidarity-network-spots since it was also comprehendible to people with little knowledge of languages mostly spoken by activists, such as English, French and Italian. Settling on a middle ground among different views regarding the practice of *Passeurisme*, typically said spots were also open to Passeurs, as long as no business was conducted there.

term—by activists and myself alike—is rooted in its political character: it intentionally distances itself from legal categories and the positive or negative implications these imply. Activists were keen not to reduce individuals to their legal status or to the mere act of migration. Many of those I spoke with, who were engaged in acts of support, shared the view that their role was not to assess or pass judgment on people's reasons for traveling, but rather to second them in the pursuit of their self-defined goals. The emphasis, then, should lie on the fact that these are human beings—individuals—who, for whatever reason, find themselves in a state of movement.

This leads to a further reason for the use of this term: within the context of the border regime in Ventimiglia, and in view of how the presence of these individuals affects the local space, it seems largely irrelevant whether they are, from a legal standpoint, categorized as migrants or refugees. Whether individuals flee war or "merely" poverty, whether they hold official status or travel irregularly, whether they possess documents or not; all this has little bearing on the impact they have on the region. Legally speaking, these distinctions are often moot in practice: according to my research, pushbacks typically occurred without individuals being granted the opportunity to claim asylum or to clarify their status to the authorities anyway. So the term *people on the move* is deliberately broad, and lacks a precise legal definition (even though it is employed by major institutions such as the United Nations; (cf.: UNHCR (2)), and makes no distinction between different causes of migration; distinctions which, in legal terms, are highly consequential for the rights that follow (Pijnenburg, Rijken. 2020: 283f). Regardless of their specific legal standing, these individuals are indisputably *people* and, as such, entitled to universal human rights; rights that formally apply in all cases and coexist alongside other legal frameworks.



Figure 6: Place of solidarity "Bar Hobbit" managed by an engaged local. Photo taken shortly before its closing

Attempting to define and delineate these categories and groups is both necessary and yet almost impossible, because in practice they often overlap. Many activists come from other parts of Europe but reside—at least temporarily—in the area, which in a sense makes them *locals* as well. Conversely, many locals are actively involved in activist efforts and thus occupy both roles at once. The activist Camilo, who had previously visited the region multiple

times, ascribing to himself yet another category—namely as a tourist—presents his dual connection to the situation as follows:

> *"I got confronted with the gravity of the situation. And I think at some point that it felt untenable to remain a tourist. I have a complicated relationship to the place in the sense that I experienced it as a home place. But I'm also there as a visitor, which always creates this tension, what do I actually contribute? Or am I just profiteering of this landscape of this, you know? And I guess, why I started engaging with the refugee crisis there it's partly motivated by just the visibility of it, [...] the visibility of human suffering, which is really strong, [...]. And it's definitely coupled by this wish to contribute in a meaningful way to that particular environment, to the locality; in a way that aligns with my political vision but also my appreciation for that place as a place I love*." (Interview with Camilo)

The term *passeur* can, of course, subsume many others as well. Many passeurs have long resided in Ventimiglia or were even born there. Their activities may at times even be perceived as activist; akin to aiding in an escape. While the economic dimension of the practice complicates such interpretations, the local Otello (whom we will revisit later) insisted on identifying as a passeur yet claimed to offer his services free of charge. It is also important to note that many smugglers in the region simultaneously fit the definition of people on the move in many regards. Given the precarious economic situations of a great deal of passeurs, it was often difficult even for seasoned activists to discern whether an individual was present at key locations in Ventimiglia to seek support for their own journey or instead to conduct business. Moreover, individuals stranded in Ventimiglia would frequently participate in activist spaces (something generally encouraged by the organizers of these places) or work on the lower rungs of the region's complex smuggling networks, for instance by guiding potential clients to locations where they could be connected with other facilitators (cf.: Vergnano. 2020. 743).

What emerges is a picture of actors who are, on the one hand, difficult to categorize and, on the other, in constant motion; across social spheres, through the region, and over the border. *Movement* is indeed a prevailing theme: the ever-shifting dynamics of the border demand ongoing adaptation, and the actors of Ventimiglia—human and non-human alike—exist in a state of perpetual motion, not only in a physical-geographic sense, but also socio-politically (cf. Malkki. 1992: 37). This makes the term *people on the move* a potentially unsettling one, as it defines a group through movement and therefore implies stasis in others; even though

already in the late 20th century, anthropologists such as Gupta, Ferguson, Appadurai, and Malkki critically challenged the discipline's emphasis on fixed categories of place and identity (cf. Chatty. 2014: 80). As Malkki pointed out in 1992, mobility is not the exclusive feature of migrating populations, but a constitutive element of human culture and identity per se:

> "*People have always moved—whether through desire or through violence.*" (Malkki. 1992: 24).

Noel B. Salazar in turn noted how within the logic of the European labor exchange regime the term *mobility* when used to describe transnational crossing is limited only to EU citizens while the movement across borders of third-country nationals for various reasons is rather coined *migration* (2018: 123). Thus, it follows that the definition of movement is much more than a question of mere theoretical view but is rooted in real tangible economic and border-political legislation. Other definitional approaches also prove difficult in this case since terms such as *migrant* or *refugee* carry specific legal connotations, yet to most the individual reasons of why many people on the move commence and maintain their journeys remain unknown. Academic attempts to differentiate, for instance between "rooted" citizens and "dislocated" refugees (cf. Chatty. 2014: 75), fail to capture the reality on the ground: as we will see, migrants do not merely pass through space, they also inhabit and shape it; just as locals do not merely remain in place, but are themselves in motion. People are never only dislocated from their places of origin; they also localize themselves and by that transform the spaces in which they dwell (cf.: Schiocchet, et. al. 2020: 100).

Ultimately, the terms used by actors in the field—regardless of anthropological analysis—are deeply embedded in the local historical context and carry their own legitimacy. Thus, when this thesis repeatedly (though not exclusively) uses terms such as *activist*, *passeur* or *people on the move*, this serves to reflect the cultural environment of the Ventimiglia crisis.



Figure 7: People charging their phones during the food distribution at Via Tenda

Nevertheless, readers are encouraged to remain mindful of the complexity and fluidity these terms carry throughout the text.

But let us return to the concrete reality of the border regime. The streets of the city function as a meeting ground for actors of all kinds, who together establish informal communities and infrastructures through which they engage with one another. These spaces are anything but static; shaped by ongoing discourse and dissent, they are in a constant state of transformation. They serve as sites of information exchange, relational formation, and basic provisioning. In the end, however, all efforts converge toward the border, located eight kilometers to the west. In simplified terms: the place activists seek to open, while police forces aim to secure it. Passeurs search the city for clients to market their product—which consist of an allegedly safe conduct across the border—and people on the move gather knowledge and resources in town in preparation for yet another attempt to cross into France. However, when repeated attempts to travel by train fail or when one is fortunate enough to obtain the necessary knowledge, many opt for the journey on foot across a certain mountain ridge known to most as the *Passo della Morte*.

2.4. The Passo della Morte

This ridge, the Passo della Morte, will ultimately be the focus of this thesis. Yet, we must perceive the events unfolding at this rather narrow path of only about five kilometers in length as embedded in dynamics evolving on a much larger transnational scale. However, engaging with the subject on the level of international politics with all the extensive implications that come with it would run the risk of going beyond the scope of this paper and certainly lead away from the perspective I wish to take. Instead, I aim to sketch out complex relations between a variety of actors who are all involved in this crisis in one way or another by focusing on a geographically circumscribed territory as well as its local expressions of a global dynamic.

The crisis evolving at Europe's inner and outer borders cannot be traced back to migration itself, but rather in the ways migration is handled. While it is naturally crucial to engage with the historical and broader political context of the situation in and around Ventimiglia, the central focus of this particular inquiry will be on the reactions and adaptations that emerge in response. In this regard, the Passo della Morte serves as a powerful symbol: in its current form it is to be understood as the product of reactive processes following the closure of the

border and of the discourses which were set in motion by that. The trail presents itself as a site where traces of all involved actors can be found. What unfolds here is part of a broader pattern evident along many borders of European states, and it is within this context that the phenomenon must be understood. Naturally, the Ventimiglia region is not detached from these processes: on the contrary, it is marked by a particular intensity of their manifestation. Presumably, the system of profound contradictions, fragmentations, and mutations of the broader system—which have been dwelled on in preceding chapters—cannot be eliminated at a local level. However, it is precisely in the microcosm that the larger web of regulations and competing interests becomes more visible, and perhaps even more accessible to critical disentanglement. And therefore, I argue that individual solutions to concrete obstacles—even when these are to be understood as entangled in systems operating on a global basis—are forged at a local level. So let us direct our attention to this particular locality in question.



Figure 8: Walking on Via Woronoff towards Grimaldi

Approximately one kilometer east of the border post, there is a turn-off from Via Aurelia (respectively *Strada Statale no.1*) with a road leading up the slope to the village built on the cliffy coast: Grimaldi. The old houses along the main road *Via Woronoff* together with the picturesque little square offer quite a lovely sight and a view over the coastline. Yet, the town square also marks the starting point of a hiking path leading westward out of the village and along a rather steep and narrow trail into the shrubbery. If one were to follow this path, she would start by ascending the steep village road, which winds its way through the houses and up the slope to the edge of the settlement, continuing to climb beyond. It should be noted that despite the narrowness of the ravine, several paths branch off from Grimaldi, but only one offers any significant visual cover. Along the path, hikers will repeatedly encounter junctions, where branches of the path lead perilously close to, or even into, steep drop-offs.

Following the correct route, one ascends the steep switchbacks only to then descend again along the slopes into the valley. Along the path, one encounters a series of ruins, likely former farmsteads, now overgrown and littered. Despite their derelict state, these ruins continue to be used - by a variety of groups and for numerous reasons. Overhead, you see the highway

bridge *Ponte San Ludovico* spanning the ravine at great height, serving as a direct connection for cars and trucks between both sides. At the same time, it offers a clear view of the valley and additionally on anyone attempting to traverse it, unless they find concealment under the trees, shrubs, or behind the ruins' walls. At the lowest point of the valley, a small stream flows through the ravine, cascading down from the hills like a little waterfall. This stream—the river St. Luigi—can be crossed via a narrow metal bridge. Passing several more ruins, hikers will then have to climb up the west side of the ravine. This second half of the trail is significantly more challenging and can at times be even a bit dangerous. In some sections, the path becomes rather steep and requires climbing now and then. However, at these passages one will sometimes encounter ropes tied to trees assisting with the ascent. Ultimately, depending on the hiker's experience, physical condition, and the time of day, the track might take about two hours when walking quickly.



Figure 9

At the end of the trail, the vegetation becomes sparse, and one suddenly finds herself in a rugged rocky landscape. The slopes are steep, and caution is essential to avoid falling. With the trees and shrubs disappearing, any form of cover also vanishes. Then, quite suddenly, you reach the border. Here, the boundary is particularly conspicuous, marked by a border fence. According to an activist who has spent years in the area, this is the only location in the region where the border materializes as a physical wall. On the other side of the fence lies the formal territory of the French Republic, with views of the rooftops of the border city of Menton. Despite the changing landscape and challenges during the hike practically everywhere on the path you come across hundreds of pieces of clothing and hygiene products. At the same time, documents and all sorts of paper litter the ground and a vast amount of markings and signs are attached to trees, stones and walls all along the way. This might provide a first glance of the actual history of this path which looks back on a long tradition of clandestine migration and escape.

Figure 11: beyond the fence



The path cannot be disentangled from Ventimiglia's history with the border. This excerpt from a map reproduced in Paolo Veziano's work (2016: 224) marks the Passo della Morte as one of

the principal routes of "illegal crossings," located just north of the railway line. Notably, police border posts are positioned on both sides of the path; an arrangement that speaks to the entanglement of state authorities in smuggling activities, as previously discussed. A particularly striking historical example is the partially documented story of Robert Baruch, a man who fled from St. Pölten and ultimately succeeded in crossing the Passo della Morte. According to an obituary published by the Institute for Jewish History in Austria, both Jewish communities and Italian border officials were actively involved in a network that enabled at least 400 documented border crossings. Baruch—despite being in danger himself—took on the role of helper, passing on his knowledge to others via letters and a hand-drawn map of the Passo della Morte, which he sent to the Jewish community in Merano and, by extension, to other refugees (2021: 76).[6]

The path's long and eventful history is also reflected in its name:
The designation *Passo della Morte* (literally, "Path of Death") is hardly coincidental. According to Enzo Barnabà, the name can be traced back to a series of fatal accidents in the previous century, as people repeatedly fell to their deaths while attempting to traverse the route. Between the end of World War II and 1990 alone, the path is said to have claimed 127 lives (Barnabà. 2018: 46; cf.: Proglio. 2021: 18). More recently, according to data collected by the alliance United for Intercultural Action, at least six individuals have died along the gorge since 2016 (cf.: United. 2024). According to a flyer containing date and place of deaths of migrating people in Ventimiglia, the most recent fatality was a young man from Eritrea who died on 12 January of this year while attempting to cross the Ponte San Ludovico, which spans the valley (cf.: Borderkills. 2025).[7]

In fact, the name of the path is far from unambiguous and the same holds true for its geographical localization and limitations. Although the area formally falls under the administration of Ventimiglia, it is neither listed as an official hiking trail nor maintained by any public authority. As such, no registered toponym exists for the path in cadastral records. This has led to diverging definitions of which sections are considered part of the *Passo*, and even to the emergence of entirely different names. From local residents of Grimaldi, including the historian Enzo Barnabà, I encountered multiple, sometimes conflicting, definitions.

[6] Despite his successful escape over the mountains, Robert Baruch was later apprehended in France and in 1942 ultimately murdered in Auschwitz (Institut für jüdische Geschichte Österreichs. 2021: 78).
[7] Please note that due to the clandestine nature of no-border-activists' work the sources of most information material regarding migrants' deaths in the area are rather hard to validate. The flyer mentioned here was handed to me by an engaged local.

Particularly the latter, Enzo Barnabà, insisted that only the rocky section right underneath the border fence should be referred to as *Passo della Morte*, a naming he attributes to a journalist who coined the term referring to the strikingly high number of deaths along this path (2024: 53). Barnabà further notes that prior to this designation, the path was known as *Passu d'a Trumpa*, a term derived from the word *tromba*, meaning "void" or "hollow space"; a reference to the steep cliffs that dominate the landscape (cf. Barnabà 2018: 23). Among activists and *passeurs*, a variety of alternative names and definitions circulate as well, including the Spanish variant *Paso de la Muerte*, and one activist even referred to it as *Cammino del Sole*, alluding to the numerous sun symbols that appear along the path (to which we will come back later in this thesis). In recognition of the path's rather positive role as a route of escape, residents of Menton and Grimaldi have also referred to it as the *Sentiero della Speranza* ("Path of Hope"). Within this context, where the name itself became part of a binational commemorative project, a trilingual memorial plaque in French, Italian, and Hebrew was originally planned (Barnabà 2021: 56f). The abrupt closure of the border ultimately prevented this initiative from materializing.

It quickly becomes evident that this is not a site defined by a singular function or unambiguous property regime. Rather, the question of naming is clearly a question of interpretation; and, by extension, of valuation. The term *Morte* may serve as a stark reminder of those who lost their lives while attempting to cross, whereas *Speranza* reflects the promise the path still holds for some. Moreover, the route is traversed and named by a wide array of individuals, many of whom may not be deeply acquainted with its layered history. As a form of compromise, Barnabà occasionally opts for a hybrid formulation: *Sentiero del Passo* (ibid.). However, this thesis aims to remain as close to field terminology and ideology as possible. Yet here we find ourselves in a certain bind. Barnabà, the local historian, who certainly invested more time in inquiring about the path's history than most other actors I encountered, argues that *Passo della Morte* refers only to one particular section of the trail. In contrast, most of my interlocutors, many of whom actively traverse the path, use the term to describe the entire route starting from Grimaldi. Connecting the ability to name and geographically frame space with notions of appropriation has been a common theme in Anthropology ever since the *reflexive turn* the discipline has taken in the final decades of the last century. Following John Brian Harley's contribution to the debate and with regards to the wording employed for this specific piece of land I argue it should likewise be the researcher's task "[...] *to break the assumed link between reality and representation which has dominated cartographic thinking* [...]" (Harley. 2011 (1987): 57). Harley noted that the act of classifying

and localizing space hermeneutically would already produce political reality (2011 (1987)). Hence, the decision which wording to pick as a researcher turns inevitably political, by emphasizing terms used by members of some groups and therefore refrain from recognizing the naming and claiming of other groups. Consequently, hoping the esteemed reader may keep in mind that this place is not to be grasped by one singular term (something that is common along the sphere of anthropological research) this thesis will nevertheless stick to the naming utilized by most encountered actors, which is ultimately *Passo della Morte*. To put it with the journalist and author Donatella Alfonso:

> "*The Passo della Morte is—to be clear—not just a topographic idea, an arbitrary name nor is it a literary suggestion or a ritual narrative, since it is known that all those desperate, persecuted, those who were forced to flee, passed by here and are still passing. The Passo della Morte is the eyes of those who traverse it.*" (Alfonso. 2018: 121)

3. Methodology

3.1. Participant Observation

For this research, it was essential to physically visit the field and conduct empirical investigations. Consequently, I traveled to the region three times, spending a total of ten weeks on-site. Inquiring into a field which is constantly in motion and furthermore populated by actors who are at times difficult to contact in a safe and non-disturbing way, I ultimately settled for a multi-methodical approach. During my research I engaged in a variety of different qualitative techniques, such as direct and reactive participant-observation, reconnaissance and intense surveys during free walks, semi-structured open-ended interviews, object analysis, informal conversation and limited archival research. However, I observed that due to the fluid nature of the field and its communities, knowledge transfer and continuity of such appeared to be a challenging issue. The systems that facilitated the exchange of information and discourse between actors involved were in constant transformation and rarely ever of institutionalized fashion. A considerable



Figure 12: "Observing" Menton and Monaco from the top of the Passo della Morte

number of phenomena were never documented in a written form and in many cases, personal dedication and circumstances significantly influenced the transmission of knowledge. People came to the area for some time, obtained information and ultimately, when they entered another country, they took with them what they had learned so far. Even within political groups it could easily happen that one activist would not be privy to know-how another activist managed to obtain, once the latter left the territory. One of the factors contributing to this matter is undoubtedly the constant threat of police repression experienced by activists, passeurs and migrants all together. This issue in conjunction with the imperative security policy has consequently engendered a heightened challenge to organize oneself within more institutionalized structures. Naturally, information was shared through communities and informal infrastructure beyond borders and over time periods, but gaining access to such systems presupposes prior knowledge in turn and is not always easy to achieve when moving in the field, which ultimately requires numerous visits to Ventimiglia. Keeping that in mind, I will elaborate on each of my stays and their significance within the context of my research in the following sections.

3.1.1. Cooking Curry at the border

In February 2021, I traveled to Ventimiglia for the first time. I stayed with a group called *Kesha Niya*, an international collective consisting of activists who remained on-site for several weeks at a time. By the time I began my stay, the group had already been active in the field for many years and had therefore established rather strong connections with other local actors. Due to its rather deep integration into the region, the group's structure and in particular its field of action were constantly influenced by fluctuations in the political situation, requiring it to adapt continuously. During my time participating in their political work, the group was highly active, focusing on providing warm meals, beverages, and information at a location known as the *Border Spot*. This spot, situated on a cliffside viewpoint along the Via

Aurelia was a critical site where people apprehended by the authorities during border crossings—and subsequently pushed back within a few hours—were forced to walk back to Ventimiglia along this single road. This Spot was conveniently located right where the via Woronoff emerges from the Via Aurelia and is then leading up to the village of Grimaldi and to the Passo della Morte. So, people walking towards Ventimiglia as well as people intending to hike over the mountains would pass by this distinct location. Since it was a core priority for the group to be present at every pushback (which began early in the morning around 6 AM, continued throughout the day, yet never took place at night), the group operated on a two-shift system to ensure that activists were always on-site to provide basic support and information to people new to Ventimiglia. Due to its accessibility as well as the opportunity to obtain coffee and warm food the border spot was frequented by a variety of different groups: Inhabitants of nearby houses (often with complaints, sometimes out of curiosity) as well as other activist like medicines sans Frontières and naturally a lot of passeurs as well.

During my five-week stay, I went to the border almost daily, engaging in numerous conversations with individuals subjected to pushbacks. Many attempted to cross the frontier multiple times in succession, meaning that I encountered some people every day for over a week. This often provided enough time to build rapport and establish trust. Apart from distributing information and collecting pushback data, these types of informal chatting together with cooking big pots of curry played a rather big role in shaping the experience of my first stay in Ventimiglia; thus the name of the chapter. Kesha Niya also collaborated closely with various other actors in the region, including engaged locals, Caritas Ventimiglia, international organizations such as *Médecins Sans Frontières* and other activist groups like *Progetto20k*, which I joined during my second visit to the field It was during this period that



Figure 13: The Border Spot in 2021. Now closed due to alleged safety hazards according to Enzo Barnabà

the idea emerged to process my experiences academically. However, I was often unable to obtain explicit consent from most of my conversation partners regarding the use of the information they shared. Consequently, personal details from these conversations have not been included in this work. Nevertheless, the stay was of great significance, as it provided me with a quite in-depth understanding of the political situation and the field while also allowing me to establish a solid network.

3.1.2. Hanging out at Upupa

For my second field visit, I joined the group *Progetto20k* ("*20k*"), which was mentioned above and spent four weeks on-site in August 2023. Since Kesha Niya had disbanded shortly before, multiple groups took on the task of so-called *border monitoring*[8] near the Border Spot, a responsibility previously handled by Kesha Niya alone. 20k assumed this role on two mornings per week. However, the group's primary focus was maintaining a kind of daytime center named *Upupa* providing information, wi-fi and coffee. This institution, which took over the task previously met by an institution called *Eufemia* until its closure, was located on Via Tenda; right next to the parking lot where food was distributed in the evenings by dedicated groups and near the highway bridge, under which informal camps of people on the move had repeatedly formed over the years.



Figure 14: Upupa in 2023. Until its closing a meeting point for marginalized people of all kinds.

During my fieldwork, the group placed great emphasis on cooperating with marginalized individuals in the city and fostering their self-organization. Daily tasks—such as keeping track of coffee and tea supplies, distributing information and encouraging individual initiative in maintaining Upupa among its users—were manageable, allowing ample time for conversations and exchange. Additionally, 20k played a prominent role in networking among different actors, including activist groups, locals, and international organizations. Almost simultaneously with my arrival, the group *Noname Kitchen* entered the field, where it remains

[8] The term *Border Monitoring* refers to the practice of registering daily pushback numbers as well as collecting testimonies of specifically brutal rights violations. Various groups would cooperate on fixed schedules and exchange statistics and data.

active to this day in various supportive tasks while posting updates concerning the current state of the situation from time to time. As I was eager to engage in political work, I participated in nearly every Border Spot shift and attended numerous networking meetings with other groups. By that time, the idea of writing my master's thesis on the region had already taken shape, though I had not yet fully defined its focus. During this period, I engaged furthermore in obtaining data, yet I refrained from conducting formal interviews. Instead, I emphasized participant observation and informal conversations.

3.1.3. Returning to Ventimiglia

For my third visit, I took a different approach: This time, I did not join any political group but instead adopted the role of a researcher exclusively. My goal was to actively fill the gaps concerning knowledge that had remained after my previous visits, as much as to inquire about changes caused by current development.

I arrived in Ventimiglia at the end of February 2025 and stayed until the beginning of March. During this time, I rented accommodation in the city and spent each day conducting fieldwork, systematically visiting different sites. While during this visit, I was not part of a group engaged in political work in the territory, I was able to collect valuable data on a daily basis. Similar to my former stays, I engaged in informal conversations with people in precarious conditions as well as with residents of Ventimiglia and Grimaldi (at the beginning of the Passo della Morte), as well as with passeurs (some of them presumably engaging in such profession, some being very upfront about it) and some activists from the daily Food Distribution in the parking lot near the bridge under which many marginalized (in one way or the other) people reside. As I elaborated earlier in the text it often ends up being difficult to distinguish passeurs and those people who engage in the field for rather ideological reasons or because they individually wish to cross the border. However, I managed to conduct a lengthy conversation with a local actor who claimed rather proudly to be a *passeur*. I recorded all my observations through audio notes, which I later transcribed.

As mentioned earlier, in the wake of the European Court of Human Rights' ruling in autumn 2023 (cf.: DYLLA. 2023), the situation in Ventimiglia initially changed significantly, with reports indicating a sharp decline in pushbacks. However, according to some activists I talked to, police practices have now reverted to those observed in 2021 and 2023 after a short phase

of “waving-through”. Nonetheless, migration routes seem to have shifted further north, which–according to my informants–appears to be the main reason for the reduced presence of people on the move in Ventimiglia. Despite this, I encountered numerous stranded individuals in the city, as well as people preparing to set out for the Passo della Morte. According to residents of Grimaldi the Passo itself continues to be used at all hours of the day and night, across all seasons. Naturally, I went hiking the Passo a couple more times, as I did during all my stays. Yet, on one occasion I was accompanied by two friends. Having walked the path before, I was well aware of what to expect. At the same time, the symbols and informal infrastructure along the route had changed significantly, and even as a group we repeatedly lost our way. Nonetheless, we managed to collect an extensive amount of data along the trail, documenting our experience through a small open-group interview.

The main difference between this particular fieldwork and the two previous engagements in the field lies naturally in the stronger focus on conducting exclusively research, instead of spending half of the time in active political work. Secondly, prior inquiry focused more broadly on the crisis evolving in Ventimiglia per se, with the Passo della Morte being just one component of it. In 2025 I emphasized predominantly on the Passo itself. Collecting all this data clearly demonstrated the importance of being familiar with the field and having prior engagement in it. Some of my informants assumed a baseline understanding of the situation, while others wished to ensure that I had been politically involved as an activist and could empathize with their perspectives and actions. Knowledge of specific sites—including informal camps, pathways, and support structures—proved essential, as did familiarity with particularly dominant or active individuals and the ability to be recognized by them. During 2025 as much as on every visit to the field, modest French language skills were crucial for effective communication with both locals and most people on the move in the area.

3.2. Walking along the Path

> *“Ethnographers* [...] *are accustomed to carrying out much of their work on foot. But while living with a group of people usually means walking around with them, it is rare to find ethnography that reflects on walking itself* [...]” (Ingold, Vergunst. 2008: 3)

Ventimiglia and its surroundings are characterized by a particularly high density of actors with varying interests and an extremely high number of highly political and identity-shaping

processes. And all of this takes place in a relatively small area. This applies even more to the Passo della Morte, since the level of spatial limitation due to its geographical constitution is strongly tangible. It goes without saying that the events accumulating here are not confined to this region alone: of course, the border officers on site are subject to directives made at the national level, whose decision-makers, in turn, are bound by international and supranational agreements. Many of the activists and the systems in which they operate have international backgrounds and roots in various European countries. People on the move as well as actors with a rather *economic* focus come from countries on other continents and maintain international relations. Not least, the complex situation that is so clearly expressed along this border cannot be understood without considering global economic, post-colonial and juridical conditions, some of which I aimed to outline in previous chapters. These shape the reasons for people trying to migrate across borders, as well as those trying to prevent them. For my research, I chose this location because I aim to display that large, global dynamics concerning security, identity and freedom of movement are manifested at a local level here (cf.: Rinauro. 2021: 51).

In anthropological science production, paths have traditionally played an important role. Broinslaw Malinowski's study of the circulation of goods between the Trobriand Islands—*the Kula* (1984 (1922))—rightfully holds a place as a foundational work in anthropological research: the exchange of objects between geographically separated societies plays a formative role in the reproduction of their structures. Around 60 years later, Arjun Appudarai added that methodologically the motion or circulation of objects can serve to illuminate their context concerning humans and societies (1986: 5). From an economic perspective, trade and barter economies are also fundamental to social exchange. The same holds for other forms of geographical connections between people and societies, as James E. Snead outlines:

> "*Trails, paths, and roads are essential structures of the human landscape. They weave together the disparate elements of daily lives, bridging distance and obstacles to connect us to each other.*" (2009: 1)

However, despite some existing studies (and as such in various forms for a long time) the author also criticizes that a greater part of research would take place in isolation or lack cross-citation (Ibid.: 3). In any case, the aim in this thesis is not only to examine the geography of the Passo della Morte, but also to connect the research to the objects of the path and their political implications and effects.

Regarding methodology, I am choosing a mix of approaches outlined by Snead: the foundation is, of course, the individual traversal of the path by the researcher herself* and by others; the so-called *Reconnaissance Survey*. During the three stays in the region, I walked the Passo several times at different times of the day, which corresponds to the concept of the *Intense Survey* (Ibid.: 10). This approach is particularly suitable in this case, as the path, with its approximately five kilometers in length, is not very extensive but requires multiple visits due to its density of objects and symbols, which are in constant flux. This allows for the association between multiple categories of evidence, which is necessary for this methodological principle. A third dimension involves the incorporation of *Phenomenology and Spatial Theory*. The locality and its symbols can of course not only be understood in physical terms. Instead, it is important to recognize its function as not only a connection between two cultural and political points but that the Passo *itself* is to be perceived as a location of cultural and political negotiation. It is not only traversed but also *inhabited* by actors of various sorts with a number of motivations and ideologies. It has therefore to be grasped as culturally shaped through its inhabitants' activities. Acknowledging this path as a site of political discourse is of crucial necessity to approach this topic, since the Passo della Morte is walked and made accessible by bearers of political motives and cultural systems. However, it is ultimately experienced individually. Using a phenomenological or spatial approach might therefore "[...] *inform us about alternate cultural systems of managing geographic information*." (Ibid.: 15)



Figure 15: The author on the Passo

3.3. Recorded Interviews

To collect data beyond my individual experience of the path as a researcher, I employed several other methods. As mentioned earlier in the text, I decided against conducting formal interviews with people on the move as well as smugglers for several reasons. One obvious reason lies in the difficulty of creating a comfortable and above all *safe* environment for the individuals involved. The two groups mentioned here are, of course, forced to use the path clandestinely. If they are encountered along the Passo, it usually means something has gone wrong. Consequently, discussing in a formal setting how an action conflicting with existing

laws was carried out seems somewhat counterintuitive and, in certain cases, even risky; for both the interviewees and the researcher. The second reason follows almost naturally from the first: the research for this study aims to interfere as little as possible with the individual projects of the actors involved. As a researcher, I naturally want to avoid exacerbating the situations of the people involved. They should be able to carry out their individual projects undisturbed; of course, only as long as no one is harmed in the process. Otherwise, the role of the researcher could conflict with that of an activist; an issue which has to be addressed anyway at a later point in the text. Therefore, the information I was able to gather about these groups during my stays comes to a greater part from observations and informal conversations.

However, in the end, I did need additional data obtained through rather formal methods as well. For this purpose, I conducted problem-centered expert interviews with actors who were either directly involved in the Passo della Morte or engaged in structures surrounding it. These interviews focused partly on individual perceptions and experiences, as well as on knowledge gained through practical engagement and research. In typical anthropological fashion, I maintained a certain openness in my questioning. Nonetheless, several conversations revolved around specific areas of expertise that my interviewees had developed over time (Witzel. 2000: 4ff). In this way, I sought to address the gaps that remained after collecting data via participant observation, personal experience, informal conversations, and source research. As part of my ongoing inquiry, I successfully conducted two formal interviews with activists who had specific expertise on the Passo della Morte, particularly regarding its geography and infrastructure. Both had been active in the field for several months and had closely examined potential routes for border crossings. For a third interview, I spoke with another activist who, while not having traversed the Passo della Morte itself, had spent an extended period studying a range of alternative routes around Ventimiglia that also lead into France. His work included assessing the accessibility of these paths and the extent to which they were safe to hike.

Through a combination of persistence and luck, I also had the opportunity to meet the writer Enzo Barnabà. As long-time resident of Grimaldi—the village at the entrance to the path—Barnabà has authored several books on the history of the border and Franco-Italian relations in the region. For my research, I drew particularly on two of his works (2018, 2024). In addition to their insights into clandestine border routes, all of my interview partners shared extensive knowledge of the ongoing crisis in Ventimiglia since 2014/15. The last time I traversed the full length of the Passo della Morte, from Via Aurelia to the center of Menton in

2025 I did not undertake the walk with activists actively engaged in the field but instead with two friends. Inspired by Margarethe Kusenbach (2003), Tim Ingold and Jo Lee (2006, 2008), and a compelling study by Monika Palmberger (2022), I aimed to integrate the experience of walking as a mode of knowledge production into my anthropological data collection. Therefore, I also invited two friends who were not actively engaged with any political group in the field and then conducted a small interview with said friends, asking them to describe their impressions, emotions, and memories of the path.

3.4. Visual Material

As previously mentioned, I incorporate a wide range of visual material in my research. One category consists of maps designed to facilitate safe navigation along the path or even to locate it in the first place. For instance, the Institute for Jewish History St. Pölten provided me with a map created in 1939 by Robert Baruch who was forced to leave Italy due to the Mussolini regime. Said map is displayed later in the course of this thesis. Baruch managed to cross the border via the Passo della Morte and subsequently shared his notes to help other Jews escape via said path (cf.: Veziano. 2016). Additionally, I received a self-designed digital map from an activist in Ventimiglia, which can be used offline on a mobile device to indicate the safest route across the Passo. I relied on this map during my last two crossings. Finally, in my research I used photocopied notes marked with simple codes intended to show the best route into France, which were donated by a passeur.

The second category consists of photographs. During my first two visits, I took some pictures myself, next toreceiving images taken by fellow activists. At that time, however, I had not yet decided on an object-oriented methodological approach. During my third visit, I engaged more actively in Photograph, capturing approximately 400 additional images. About half of these portray the Passo della Morte itself, while the rest focus on objects found along the path. Most of these objects consist of clothing, everyday items, official documents from Italian and French migration authorities, and the aforementioned markings along the route. Additionally, I photographed distinctive features and graffiti in Ventimiglia illustrating the atmosphere in the city. Naturally, all imagery displayed in this work has been edited by the author to conceal and protect personal data.

3.5. Literature Research

The situation in Ventimiglia is certainly not as widely known as that of other migration and border-regime hotspots in Europe. Nevertheless, a number of newspaper articles in various languages have been produced over the years, each attempting to capture the immediacy of the situation at the time; mostly when new regulations came to action or the area went through rather sudden change. These articles serve as a solid foundation for further in-depth research (cf.: Amigoni et al. 2021). Naturally, people on the ground were very well informed about factual change regarding border regulations or city policy but on the other hand they were not necessarily educated about underlying legislation and its juridical substructure. Moreover, actors from various sides regularly publish public statements via social media channels. For instance, the local *Caritas* operates a Telegram channel, where monthly updates on current numbers are shared. Activist groups currently active in the field, such as Noname Kitchen, frequently post updates and contextual analyses on social media, whereas more institutionalized NGOs such as Anafé and Médecins Sans Frontières occasionally release statements or statistical data on the present situation. Furthermore, since the path itself has historically played a significant political role—particularly in the context of Italian fascism—there are several historical records on this subject, which I was able to access with the generous support of the Institute for Jewish History in St. Pölten.

Beyond these sources, thanks to the dedication of certain activists—who sometimes operate not only in the parking lots of Ventimiglia but also in the halls of Italian universities—there exists a small but valuable body of academic work addressing different aspects of the crisis in the region. However, while these sources analyze the crisis in Ventimiglia since 2014/15 from various perspectives, they only marginally discuss the Passo della Morte and even less so with the theoretical lens that I intend to apply here. In this context, I found two books (2018, 2024) that explore the history of the path from a more literary perspective. I was fortunate enough to conduct an extended interview with their author, Enzo Barnabà, as mentioned earlier. Finally, research regarding theoretical literature must be mentioned as well. As expected, making sense of the collected data required a qualified body of social science literature; particularly since the field and its actors are complicated to approach, due to the fluid nature of the environment. The latter will, however, be discussed in more detail in a later section of this thesis.

4. The Anthropologist's Role in the Field

4.1. Science and Activism

Migration per se is certainly not a new topic in anthropological research. The movement of people and objects within geographical and social space, as well as across their boundaries, has long been a standard area of interest in social science research. The addition of another component - namely, politically defined spaces; is also not a revolutionary development in the research landscape. When institutionally permitted migration exists within defined political spaces, there must consequently be so-called "irregular migration" across the boundaries of such spaces. Where this occurs, social networks and cultural concentrations emerge, and consequently, the anthropologist's gaze is never far away. However, Westphal and Behrensen criticize that migration research has often focused on individuals with relatively good legal prospects of staying in the location where they become part of the research (Behrensen, Westphal: 2019: 3f). Yet the path to that point is often marked by long struggles and uncertainty, and it is precisely this phase that remains underexplored, according to the authors. This lack of focus is likely due to the methodological challenges of conducting research with people in what is often a very difficult phase of their lives (cf.: Treiber. 2019: 216f). Naturally, this also gives rise to a variety of ethical and ideological implications. The people being studied should logically not be endangered or hindered in any way. In the field described here we encounter a great deal of people in particularly precarious situations. People crossing borders, as well as those who support their struggle in any way easily find themselves in conflict with current law, which leaves a bigger part of them quite vulnerable. In the end the researcher here must be very cautious about what type of knowledge she can share safely in this paper and which information would ultimately contradict the interests of her informers. Moreover, there is the question of presentation. As the author of this paper, I strongly wish to avoid exoticizing people in precarious situations or placing them at the center of attention through a lens of pity (cf.: Behrensen. 2019: 51).

Political activism serves a dual purpose in the context of research: On one hand, political work enables a level of proximity to actors and affected individuals that allows for deep and meaningful fieldwork. On the other hand, the analytical anthropological perspective bears the potential to sharpen the political analysis of the situation (cf: Amigoni, Palmas. 2023: 1062). I want to emphasize here that maintaining a certain degree of emotional and scientific distance is important to avoid distorted results and - on an individual emotional level - to prevent breaking under the weight of the situation's tragedy.

> *"I think the first few times when I saw people getting pushed back, you know, I was like: Shit, I felt so bad, you know? But I think after a few months you also learn to be a bit numb to it. Because otherwise you will go crazy, because it's kind of a cycle that never stops."* (Interview with Remon)

At the same time, a personal positioning within the field and an activist perspective have, at least since Nancy Scheper-Hughes, become compatible with an anthropological approach. Since the Anthropologist's sheer presence will always have an effect on the field, it would neither be reasonable, nor possible to be moving in the field as an unpolitical bystander. This naturally leads to the fact that "*Anthropologists as witnesses are accountable for what they see and what they fail to see, how they act and how they fail to act in critical situations*." (Scheper-Hughes. 1995: 419) Moreover, as mentioned, acknowledging its own involvement in the processes taking play around oneself might offer advantages from a scientific standpoint. As Scheper-Hughes describes in detail, it seems rather "perverse" (Ibid.: 418) to maintain a supposedly objective and detached coldness toward events while simultaneously feigning interest. Moreover, it is actually essential to allow for one's own emotional involvement in order to understand processes around oneself. These do not occur on neutral ground but rather carry interpersonal implications. To put it with the words of Lee and Ingold:

> "*[...] we cannot simply walk into other people's worlds, and expect thereby to participate with them. To participate is not to walk into but to walk with [...].*" (Lee, Ingold. 2006: 67)

However, despite all the empathy and compassion, one must not forget that a certain form of distance is not a choice but a reality: Anthropologists can withdraw from most situations at any time, cross borders with ease; especially if they possess a European passport. Furthermore, they typically have not experienced what people on the move have endured. Claiming an understanding of emotions that one cannot truly inhabit would be arrogant and unscientific. Finally, there is the distance that people in the field naturally create toward the anthropologist: the expectation from border officers that the anthropologist is inherently hostile toward them; the fear among smugglers of moral judgment for their actions; and, not least, the mistrust from people on the move, particularly women, toward white men, whose motivations are often not easily discernible. Especially the field of irregular migration might present itself as rather fluid and can thus be difficult to grasp at times. Dynamics in such fields are highly dependent on even smaller political inputs and therefore also a great deal of punctual visits to the field can provide but a rather fragmented sight (Treiber. 2019: 216f).

When inquiring about a field whose actors and inhabitants operate from hardly definable but nonetheless clearly asymmetrical positions, the aim should not be to produce politically neutral, objective and incontestable knowledge. With regards to the postcolonial turn in social science, it should by now be common ground that knowledge production cannot be separated from the history of oppression and proclaimed neutrality can contribute to cement such asymmetry (cf.: Schiocchet. 2015: 20f). On the other hand, a researcher does not set out to proclaim her* individual political manifesto either. To find a suitable position in this ongoing debate in anthropological science production is difficult but nonetheless necessary when attempting to conduct research in a field so politically contested. However, producing science while simultaneously dealing with political affiliation might become less conflicting when exploring the circumstances in a more extensive and thus also historical scape and her* own connection to it. To understand that the field at hand does not resemble a sterile experimental setup must be a first goal; to reflect and emphasize the research's own backgrounds and limitations will then be the second step (Ibid.). Ultimately, the researcher herself* is not sitting in a static vantage point, observing otherwise process-like surroundings. Naturally, she* is also part of changing dynamics and can at times be to varying degrees involved or impacted by certain events. Constant reflection, while repeatedly interconnecting proximity and distance, can help finding its own role in the field (Treiber. 2019: 221). Anthropologists do not have to understand themself as distant voyeurs with curbed attachment watching events that do not affect them. Instead, it is important to perceive oneself as part of the social formation that she* naturally cannot avoid influencing by sheer presence. However, this paper aims not to present, so to speak, the 'suffering of the oppressed', but rather seeks to portray the 'fighting of the autonomous'. The goal is to depict the various people acting in the field on their own terms, meaning that they collectively affect and ultimately shape the landscape of the border.

4.2. Science and Ethics.

After reading the discussions in the previous chapters, it seems only logical that both working *with* and researching the situation *in* Ventimiglia is not exempt from either a moral or legal perspective. Almost all the actors mentioned in this work operate in a space that is morally contested and legally ambiguous.

Activists who offered advice to people on the move always had to ensure that their assistance focused solely on survival in Ventimiglia. Any advice related to the border could quickly fall into the legal category of smuggling. Considering the suspected and actual surveillance, activists furthermore always had to be aware of the implications of their actions and keep in mind the legal boundaries within which they could operate.

The same, of course, applies to passeurs and other local entrepreneurs. For those who ended up in this line of work due to precarious circumstances, the practice carried enormous risks. Given the peculiar high number of restaurants and shops whose real economic purpose appeared to be connecting passeurs with "customers", it sometimes felt as though half the town was in some way involved in the smuggling business. It eventually became clear that many acquaintances and even some prominent figures in the town also engaged in *passeurisme* to improve their financial situation. However, there is no clear moral consensus here. On the one hand, it must be acknowledged that the smuggling networks in Ventimiglia are likely very large and complex, and on the other, that their members occupy very different positions within these networks, which come with varying risks and rewards. This became apparent to me after numerous informal conversations with individuals involved in these professions, as well as with some activists (who, in a way, engage in quite similar activities, yet without economic compensation). Especially among activists' groups there was rarely internal agreement about this line of work: Some saw passeurs as helpers facilitating escape, while others viewed them as human traffickers; particularly since plenty of examples concerning both variants circulated. However, in this article, I will refrain from passing judgment on this rather large group of individuals. Instead, they will be depicted as individual actors with their own (varying) agencies operating within the complex dynamics of the border. Furthermore, the state authorities of France and Italy also operate within a legally quite questionable framework. As already indicated in earlier chapters, the manner in which identity checks, arrests, and pushbacks are carried out appears to be highly contradictory. Particularly due to the involvement of military units and individual reports from people on the move describing experiences of violence and harassment. The latter, in particular, find themselves in a field of great legal precarity. They are denied entry into France, while at the same time their stay in Ventimiglia is made difficult. Access to many places and infrastructure is prohibited, informal shelters and camps are periodically demolished. The tenuous situation in which most people on the move in Ventimiglia find themselves is ultimately the reason why I refrained from conducting formal interviews with them for this research, as mentioned earlier. Just as other groups and individuals are portrayed as actors in the field with their own

agency, these individuals should also be approached on equal terms and understood as co-discussants in the production and reproduction of the political situation on and around the Passo della Morte.

Nothing could be further from an anthropologist's intent than to endanger the people they study in any way.[9] Even though a range of legally problematic practices were observed, this work seeks to refrain from moral judgment. This is of course partially done out of scientific detachment but also, not least, to protect the studied individuals. Accordingly, all names have been changed (if requested), and confidential conversations as well as legally problematic incidents have been omitted, although some of the contexts described here are hardly a secret. It does not take an anthropological study to discover that the smuggling business thrives in Ventimiglia (Amigoni, Palmas. 2023: 1059). Everyone in the region knows that people on the move attempt to cross the border and that many activists disagree with the repression of the border regime. Even the Passo della Morte is no secret to anyone who has spent a few days in the area; certainly, there is a reason for police drones occasionally hovering over the ravine and for jeeps patrolling the road down to Menton.

However, it had to be (or at least it must be attempted to be) explained as intelligible as possible that some of the words spoken in face-to-face interactions might end up being written down on these pages. In a field of such precarity it is imperative to make sure that no delicate information shared with the researcher is carelessly published. It follows that in Interviews which were conducted via online calls I had to make sure that no third party could gain access to the transcripts or audio files. It is characteristic for these groups of activists that many of those who participate in various actions in the field come from different countries and will at one point have to go home to deal with paid labor or other obligations. Consequently, for some of the Interviews I conducted, online tools were necessary. To ensure the highest level of data protection, I made sure that online interviews were end-to-end encrypted and that no other people were present in the room. In consultation with *Zentraler Sicherheitsdienst* (central security service) of the University of Vienna, I decided to use Zoom as a connecting tool. Yet, since the regular recording feature offered by said program would upload the file to the cloud, I chose software that provides such service exclusively locally on the

[9] Anthropological inquiry has played an ambiguous role throughout the history of the discipline, of which every researcher should be aware. However, even anthropologists critical to the positions they inhabit and the privileges they bring to the field can easily facilitate preserving asymmetric power dynamics through their work; therefore the discourse must constantly progress (cf.: Bauer-Amin, Schiocchet, Six-Hohenbalken. 2022).

computer–both for the recording and for the subsequent editing of the interviews. Furthermore, I transferred the data only using physical storage devices.

5. The Border, Agency and Power

5.1. How to approach it theoretically?

In the preceding chapters, I have sought to provide this project with a historical, political, and methodological framework. Since my approach aims to disentangle broader structures—at least to some extent—by examining events on a smaller scale, it was essential to establish a foundational understanding of the dynamics in Ventimiglia and within its community. We learned how deeply the landscape of the borderlands is permeated with discourse. In the Ventimiglia region everything, even institutions of law, seems negotiable depending on the necessity of the situation and all actors' actions appear to be independently related; up to a level that it becomes highly questionable if the political processes before our eyes can be grasped by only focusing on one group of actors at a time. The discussions in this section shall thus build upon this groundwork.

In previous chapters we have learned that a multitude of actors, each driven by distinct motivations, engage in shaping the Passo della Morte. We read about them in newspapers, we encounter them in the streets of Ventimiglia, and we find their traces on the path itself. There, these traces are scattered across the ground, entangled in the underbrush, embedded in the rocks. They are woven into the landscape and surround us: The imprints of people and communities, objects and artifacts, infrastructure and geography. If we look closely, we recognize how notions of value and power, inclusion and exclusion, collide and are (re-)negotiated along a stretch of mere five kilometers. All of this affects the people I spoke with along the way and was tangible for me as well every time I walked the Passo. This effect, or rather, *affect*, is difficult to grasp. It appears not to be simply an emotion, yet it produces emotions. The experience is partly physical, as the body responds through tension and relaxation, through tactile sensation and discomfort. At the same time, it is also psychological, as the mind begins to process and attempt to make sense of it. Felix Guattari describes it as follows:

> "*Affect remains hazy, atmospheric, and nevertheless perfectly apprehensible to the extent that it is characterized by the existence of threshold effects and reversals in polarity*." (Guattari. 1990: 67)

How can a place so densely populated with objects and symbols, and shaped for decades by actors of all ideological persuasions, be comprehended and situated? How can its meaning and impact be recognized? A first, seemingly obvious approach would be to engage with affect, as Guattari did in 1990. Affects appear to be dominant in the field in question, and as described above, they exert an influence on people shaping their actions and, in turn, the socio-political institutions that people construct and dismantle. However, Guattari takes this notion even further; and in doing so, deviates from our current trajectory by arguing that the relationship of human actors to"[…] *affect is not discursive, that is to say, not founded upon systems of distinctive oppositions inflected according to sequences of linear intelligibility and capitalized in memory banks that are mutually compatible*." (Ibid.)

Here, we quickly reach a conceptual limit. Is it thinkable for the affects we encounter along this place to exist completely detached from political discourses or to have not at least a discursive element to it? This is especially perplexing in a space like this; a path simultaneously traversed for over a century by people on the move, police forces, passeurs, and many others, all of whom intervene in this place in tangible ways. Thus, any explanation that overlooks the discursive element embedded in this field seems ultimately insufficient. Therefore, on the following pages I aim to inquire whether there can be affect without politics and vice versa or whether even such division in general appears questionable.

At this juncture, we can turn to Sara Ahmed who engaged with the political implications of affect with regard to nationalist policies in the United States after nine-eleven. According to her research we must not search for traces of affect inside the body of an object or a sign, but rather in their interspace: affect circulates *between* them (Ahmed. 2004: 120). We can thus state that we should inquire into the interrelationality of the things we encounter and therefore turn to Yael Navaro-Yashin. Just like this paper at hand, her research also engages with border landscapes—specifically, the violent division of Cyprus—approaching the field through the notion of affect while maintaining an awareness of the political entanglements that shape human and nonhuman actors at these border sites. In doing so, she similarly critiques Guattari's understanding of said affect for its failure to account for relationality (Navaro-Yashin. 2009: 14). As in the partially abandoned border regions of Cyprus that Navaro-Yashin examines, we find on the Passo della Morte a politically charged field,

vibrating with presence, even in moments of human absence, where living subjects and seemingly inanimate objects seem to interact. We thus encounter politically engaged actors who at first glance appear to operate in ambiguous ways. If we assume that this place is not merely a patchwork of randomly assembled actions, just as a Pollock[10] painting may appear to someone not familiar with art, then we are confronted with *agency*. But how to tackle a concept that has been discussed in social science of all couleur for decades? For a start I suggest we begin with Donald Davidson, who examined this concept fifty years ago. He approaches the complex issue as follows:

> "*Action does require that what the agent does is intentional under some description, and this in turn requires, I think, that what the agent does is known to him under some description.*" (Davidson. 2001 [1971]: 50)

The actions we encounter might then not be random but of intentional, conscious nature. However, the term 'intentional' introduces another problem: In this sentence as well in his further elaborations, Davidson denies agency to objects at all. If a human agent throws her suitcase onto the path, she* ends up being the one possessing agency, while the suitcase merely serves as a tool for the action of *throwing*. Finally, from the suitcase's perspective, said process is devoid of agency. While Davidson nevertheless remains interested in the relationship between these two, concerning our field, his framework quickly reaches its limits. Since the sheer number of seemingly agency-less objects is too great, and their influence on the field and its inhabitants appears to be too evident. It would thus be unproductive to exclude them from the process of place-making and its effects.

Before we attempt analyzing the various actors we encounter in more detail in order to examine how and to what extent they interact, we must first establish a more paradigmatic understanding of the field. A more suitable comprehension of the Passo della Morte is needed; one that manages to identify all the actors involved, thereby enabling us to understand their actions. It is therefore a logical step, one also taken by Navaro-Yashin, to approach this field through the lens of Bruno Latour.

When considering the interdependence of objects and humans within complex formations, Latour's *Actor-Network Theory* (ANT) naturally comes to mind. ANT explicitly incorporates seemingly inanimate *things* into its analysis, granting them space and significance in the

[10] Jackson Pollock will hopefully forgive my very simplistic portrayal of his art. Eventually, we might manage to come back together at a later stage of this discussion.

broader perspective. The 'social' that we encounter at the Passo della Morte, according to Latour, emerges as a network formed between human and non-human actors (Latour. 2005: 65). This approach indeed appears promising: We encounter a multitude of objects along (and around) the path, and when asking people to recount their experiences, they often express astonishment at the sheer number of things—or 'trash'—that have remained in their memory. Ignoring these objects in our analysis of this place, or dismissing their relevance, would seem rather absurd. ANT, by contrast, acknowledges that objects are not static but continuously mutable; that they can shift from one state to another in an instant. Picking an incident from 2003, Latour reminds us of this by describing how "[...] *the Columbia shuttle instantly transformed from the most complicated human instrument ever assembled to a rain of debris falling over Texas* [...]" (Latour. 2005: 81).

This event and the broader recognition of objects as crucial factors in social fabric demonstrates how revealing such objects can be for understanding social structures (Ibid.). Were Latour to walk along the Passo della Morte, he would likely perceive it as a space connected by a dense network. The nodes of this network are to be understood as all those who are present and exert influence in some form. Furthermore, these nodes are interconnected, forming a network which then all together generates action, i.e. *produces agency*.

Among these nodes, we also find objects that might initially appear lifeless or abandoned: T-shirts, stones, trail markers, and, not least, the border fence itself. Yet "[...] *any thing* [sic] *that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor—or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant*." (Ibid.: 71) Approaching these terms correctly, everything can constitute an act. In the wording of Latour said actant only then becomes an actor once it engages with others in the network. In fact, ANT goes yet a bit further: To fully grasp the role of objects in the social landscape, it demands absolute symmetry among the actants in the evaluation of their influence. Thus, the epistemological division between objects and humans, Latour argues, is itself an artificial construct (Ibid.: 75) and would therefore end up not being very useful concerning our analysis. Latour's notion of the network contains a great deal of useful thoughts when approaching our field. It initially seems reasonable to capture the Passo della Morte and its actors (who are actants in action) in their entirety. At the same time, it is both liberating but also a bit unsettling to decouple individual actors from preconceived value judgments. For Latour, the aim should not be to focus but on a single node and then to trace its actions while consequently deeming others less relevant and thereby disregard them.

Instead, all actors—each in their own way—contribute to a shared action. The Passo della Morte could thus be understood as a network that emerges through the interplay of stones, smugglers, police, cliffs, toothbrushes, newspaper reports, and countless other elements. Perhaps the agency that arises from this is then not to be perceived as a single event but rather the successful journey of people from Cameroon to France. Or maybe the action emerging from said interplay of actants should instead be understood as the *affect* that rises from the ground, evoking a feeling of tension in the body of the person witnessing the interaction.

For this study, it is also crucial to avoid any type of voyeuristic gaze of pity toward people on the move, refraining from placing their actions under the microscope for evaluation. Instead, looking at the entirety of the network allows us to see marginalized groups not as exotic outsiders but as integral parts of a collective structure—one that creates something tangible and lasting—not despite its dynamic and multifactorial nature, but because of it. They do not enter this space as outsiders; rather, they are part of this space, and ultimately, said space, in its present form, exists only through their presence.

This brings us back to the notion of discursivity; which appears not only an essential feature of the border region, but one might also argue that it plays a significant role in constituting it.

5.2. A Road without Movement?

Something, however, does not seem quite right...

Were we to invite Latour to accompany us on the *Passo della Morte*, he might point out the actants around him and continue explaining that only their interplay enables agency to emerge. Perhaps, along the path—stretched between the branches—he would find a spider's web with a fly trapped in it. Subsequently, he would argue that it is not the web alone that determines the fate of the fly, but rather the interaction of branches, web, and fly which ultimately constitutes the act of said *fly-catching*. So far, so good…

But if the accompanying spider were to crawl into the scene, it would promptly correct Latour by insisting that the web is not to be perceived as a mere raw actant but rather as a system sui generis; just as, incidentally, the fly caught in the web as well. The same, of course, applies to actors of the border such as people on the move, to border police, and to the systems that either facilitate or obstruct border crossings. But let us return to the fly and the web: Both the

web and the fly, the spider might explain, are complex entities embedded in further systems. It is at the edges of their physical existence—where they come into contact—that action emerges, ultimately leading to the fly's demise. Yet, these edges remain open for transformation, meaning that these systems are not contained. They interact and are subject to change through such interaction. It quickly becomes apparent that the spider is acting on behalf of Tim Ingold (cf.: Ingold. 2011: 89ff), who now steps out from behind a tree to join the discussion. He, who in 2011 wrote quite an amusing dialogue between a spider and an ant in order to illustrate what he perceives as gaps in the actor-network-theory, would then join said spider in discussing with Latour. They both would argue that a network, as envisioned by Latour, must consequently imply its nodes to be fixed. The actants we encounter in the field, however, constantly influence one another and are therefore always in motion. Naturally, the spider's web is a network—it is anchored at fixed points. But as a system in itself, it stands in an interdependent relationship with the spider, the fly and the branches. The fly (unfortunately, denied a voice in this debate) struggles violently, thereby moving—or rather, altering—the web. This altered web, in turn, affects the spider (for instance, it is only through these movements that the spider becomes aware of its catch). The influenced spider then acts accordingly and consumes the fly.

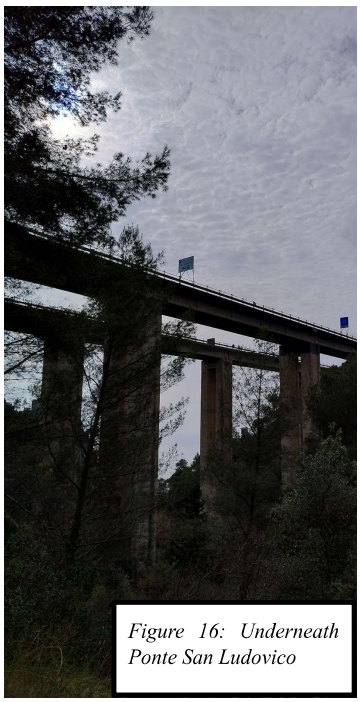


Figure 16: Underneath Ponte San Ludovico

Latour's approach of understanding agency as a network thus overlooks the mobility of its nodes. In a field constituted by people on the move migrating along a pathway—thereby setting their surroundings into motion—the concept of fixation appears rather unsatisfactory. But what about the many objects that Latour and I discovered along the roadside? The colorful markings, the scraps of paper, the toothbrushes? Are they also in motion, even though they do not appear to function as autonomous entities or systems? Ingold responds:

> "*I regard embodiment as a movement of incorporation rather than inscription, not a transcribing of form onto material but a movement wherein forms themselves are generated.*" (Ingold. 1993: 157)

Latour might at this point recall the ever-changing *Columbia shuttle*, shaped by human attribution and performative inscription; perhaps finding, at least here, some common ground. In the end, what Latour and Ingold share is their acknowledgment of objects as meaningful in

the negotiation of agency. However, Ingold does not uphold the principle of absolute symmetry between all actants in the system. The key difference lies in the level of complexity and autonomy ascribed to individual actors. For action—or rather, for agency—to emerge, interplay is required. Yet, whereas Latour sees the Passo della Morte as a *network* of actants, Ingold would conceptualize it as a *meshwork* (Ingold. 2011: 63ff) of interwoven systems. It is at the points where these systems intersect that *action* takes place. Since multiple systems converge and subsequently condition one another simultaneously, their interaction is highly processual, continuously shifting, and therefore deeply complex. Regarding the concept of lines processually forming new interconnected bodies all while maintaining autonomy, Ingold definitely draws from the ideas of Felix Guattari and Gille Deleuze, which they formulated in a *thousand plateaus*. Engaging deeper with their scientific examination of basically everything would certainly go far beyond the scope of this thesis, but it can nevertheless be stated that he was surely inspired by the concept of the rhizome as an antipode to the static notion of a tree with roots. Just like the movement of lines contained in the meshwork the "[...] *rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb "to be," but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction.*" (Guattari, Deleuze. 1987: 25)

This perspective might serve as more productive for our analysis. Looking at the interwoven nature of the place allows us to incorporate a wide range of factors as actors within the discourse. Moreover, it enables us to understand that elusive entity—the thing that hovers, intangible yet omnipresent, over the Passo della Morte (and constitutes it)—as the product of a multitude of interdependent relationships, while also accounting for the (im-)mobility of its components. These are not simply *there*, just like the rhizome as well turns against the notion of "to be" (Ibid.); rather, they are embedded in discourses just as much as they actively shape them:

> "*Thus the properties of materials, regarded as constituents of an environment, cannot be identified as fixed, essential attributes of things, but are rather processual and relational. They are neither objectively determined nor subjectively imagined but practically experienced*." (Ingold. 2011: 30)

And it is precisely this notion of *experience* that underscores the significant role that through their interactions with objects the various people of the Passo della Morte ultimately assume. This, admittedly, feels somewhat more comfortable than placing them on the same ontological

level as, say, a rock by the roadside. Nevertheless, since the Passo della Morte is inhabited and traversed by a multitude of actors, some of whose stated objectives appear fundamentally contradictory or even antagonistic, the path offers enough space for both Latour and Ingold to coexist in parallel. It is a site of discourse, and thus, Latour may continue to accompany us, occasionally contributing along the way. For now, however, the leadership of our small expedition will pass to Ingold. The spider, in addition, decides to join our little group. Things, then, are not fixed but interdependently in motion, meaning they possess neither beginning nor end. This in turn invites an interesting image: The lines, which are so constitutive for Ingold's model, may be endlessly regarding their "length", yet they do provide limits on their "sides" and that is where they intersect and produce meshworks. This imagined physicality may then strike as surprising. Yet, Ingolds counters that materials and the objects they physically constitute "[...] *do not present themselves as tokens of some common essence—materiality—that endows every worldly entity with its inherent 'objectness'; rather, they partake in the very processes of the world's ongoing generation and regeneration*." (Ingold. 2011: 26)

We thus return to a cautious distinction between human and object-like actors, while acknowledging that they influence one another and collectively co-produce action. Agency, then, is more than a mere inner freedom of mind stating "I want it, therefore I do it!"; and by extension, the Passo della Morte is then to be grasped as more than a mere collage of independently acting agents. In 2005, Saba Mahmood, who engaged elaborately with the concept of agency, already criticized the idea that freedom of individual acting would exist only outside of—or in resistance to—external norms and socio-political boundaries. Consequently, if one manages to grasp to interrelational context of acting agents along a particular environment "[...] *then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity*" (Mahmood. 2011 (2005): 14) To conceptualize it as a universally fixed idea would fail to account for the complexity underlying the genesis of the environment in question, while also overlooking the multitude of objects and symbols scattered across the path.

But how exactly does the interplay between objects and humans manifest here? Let us allow ourselves the distinction between object and human, rejected by Latour but tolerated by Ingold, and first turn our attention to the former:

5.3. How the Social shapes the Object

Objects have always played a crucial role in anthropology. Naturally, the archaeological aspect must be mentioned here, as abandoned objects can provide insights into people and the systems surrounding them, even when those people are no longer physically present (cf.: Latour. 2005: 81). This aspect will also play a role in this research, though it has to be elaborated on at a later point in this work. For now, let us inquire a bit into the socio-political dimension that comes with the term *subject*. When arguing with Michel Foucault, it quickly becomes clear that we cannot engage with subjects and objects on neutral ground. For Foucault, the act of becoming a subject constitutes positioning oneself both *inside* and *in relation to* the continuum of economic and political power. A subject cannot exist in a vacuum but is embedded[11] in a political world filled with asymmetric power dynamics (Foucault. 2013: 391). Becoming and being a subject is thus to be perceived as a political act *a priori*. When tackling the political implication evolving around notions of objects and subjects, there is yet another dimension to consider: Through objects, people can exert influence on their surroundings. A classic example of this is, of course, the object as a tool, as mentioned above. In this capacity, the object has already gained significant sociocultural meaning. The deeply political nature of the relationship between object and subject becomes evident in how fundamentally important it always has been to ideologically separate the two. From a socio-political perspective, Jane Bennett would argue that it is essential to emphasize that objects may be used by subjects. To humans, as subjects, in turn this shall not apply; that is, they must never be turned into objects. She adds a caveat: except in an intimate, consensual context. That exploitative relationships exist in which this nonetheless happens does not need to be stated (Bennet. 2010: 12), which can, according to Michel Foucault, nevertheless be the case regarding the objectification of humans in the sphere of medical and psychiatric institutions in which… "*The subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others. This process objectivizes him. Examples are the mad and the sane, the sick and the healthy, the criminals and the good boys*." (Foucault. 1983: 208)

However, the more one engages with the concept of the object, the less clear these dividing lines appear to be. We remember Latour who went a bit further by arguing that the dividing line between the material world and the sphere of humans altogether appears to be rather artificial (Latour. 2005: 75). Yet in complex systems knowledge about an object's history or

[11] Tim Ingold would employ the term "entangled" (cf.: 2011: 63).

nature can become even harder to attain, or to put it differently: It may as well remain unknown to its users. The same can also apply to the impact of objects on their environment. Defining the latter, Ingold stated:

> *"Whereas the physical world exists in and for itself, the environment is a world that continually unfolds in relation to the beings that make a living there*" (Ingold. 2011: 30)

The question persists whether we can include objects - that are commonly not perceived as *living* - in this notion of the unfolding environment.



Figure 17

Despite the undeniable importance of objects for social science research—anthropological museums worldwide are overflowing with culturally significant objects—anthropology has been relatively slow in directly engaging with objects as more than just subordinates. After all, a discarded t-shirt is much more than an extension of the human skin, and a hat is not simply an elongation to the human spine. In 1999 Marshall and Gosden criticized the social sciences for failing to recognize earlier that objects are not merely tools of human processes (Gosden, Marshall. 1999: 169). According to their argument, objects should not be seen only as instruments of sociocultural actions that were planned and initiated by their human operators. In fact, objects themselves can influence or even determine those social processes. Humans and objects are thus not merely in a relationship of decision maker and executor. Instead, their interaction can be understood as reciprocal. The lives and actions of both objects and humans mutually condition and shape one another (Ibid.). Just as a person's relationship with an object is prone to constant change, this dynamic evolves over time. People experience complex life trajectories, and the necessity for, or else relationship with, an object shifts depending on the point in life at which the person and object intersect. From this, it becomes clear that objects themselves also have a life cycle, passing through various stages. Naturally, the notion of a 'biography' implies that (thinking) individuals attribute such a concept to them. However, if we acknowledge that the act of ascribing meaning to something ultimately constitutes a display of *agency*, the act can be perceived as a process which is conducted by human and nonhuman actors collectively. Therefore, objects

might be attributed life cycles to them by subjects but they do contribute in this act. *To what extent* is then a question of weighting and therein lies one of the reasons for Ingold and Latour being in quarrel. In any case, to recognize objects as anthropological research subjects, it is essential to understand that they exist in a specific stage of their "career" at the point of study. Consequently, it may be necessary to dig deeper into the idea of objects as bearers of their own life cycles, as advocated by Kopytoff and Appadurai (1986).

Kopytoff argues that the methodology for studying the biography of an object should ultimately be the same as the one for studying the biography of a person: Where does the object come from? What is its origin story? What is the perceived age of the object, and how does this influence its utility? And finally, what happens at the end of its life cycle? Naturally, the utility of an object, like the object itself, can undergo significant transformations (Kopytoff. 1986: 66). Sadly, concerning the objects we find the Passo della Morte, it is rather difficult to study their whole biography since many of them were left behind by people who have moved on and are therefore out of our sight for now. Yet we can attempt to reconstruct (or at least to presume) some moments of their life cycle. In any case, we do witness the close linkage between human and non-human actors in exceptional moments of their biographies. Ultimately, we cannot but acknowledge that mutual influence must take place. To quote Ingold once again:

> *"Thus people are supposed to be capable of acting, and are not just acted upon, because they have acquired some of this agency. Without it, they would be but things. By the same token, however, if agency is imaginatively bestowed on things, then they can start acting like people. They can 'act back'; inducing persons in their vicinity to do what they otherwise might not.*" (Ingold. 2011: 28)

Particularly in such challenging conditions, as for instance when clandestinely attempting a border crossing at night, a strong interdependence between the various actors (for example, such as a pair of paints and its wearer) occurs, leading to alteration of their relationship. It might even change the experienced existence of either actor of the meshwork. And even when the causes of such transformations are difficult to locate, since this type of change can happen suddenly and hard to foresee, there will be socio-political implications emerging from it; as in the case of Latour's *Columbia Shuttle* (cf.: Latour. 2005: 81). For people watching this catastrophe on the television or on their control center screens, the destruction of the spaceship came probably as a surprise and was (hopefully) not anticipated by anybody. Nevertheless, the transformation of this object, was yet very affective, social and political.

This raises the question of how the utility and value of an object are interconnected. Not only can the use, non-use, or cessation of use of an object reveal much about the person involved, but it also suggests how people evaluate the utility of an object could in turn reveal much about these people themselves. Kopytoff would further argue that much can be learned about a society by examining how foreign objects are adapted or integrated (Kopytoff. 1986: 67). Considering documents, which are often found crumpled along the ground of the Passo della Morte, one might ask: what does the transformation of an official document of the French Republic into litter along a well-trodden path reveal about its former owners? Could the rejection of something as personal property be interpreted as a sign of autonomy?

To approach the answer to these questions, we will have to engage with Appadurai. As he suggests, we should focus on the processes of circulation and alteration among objects "[...] *for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories*." (1986: 5) Since human actors code objects with significance, he continues, analyzing these forms of interaction can help interpret the transactions and calculations which give value to such objects. Yet, in order to do so it will be necessary—as mentioned above—to focus on the object itself, rather than only on the sociological processes around the object, which define the moment of transaction (Ibid.). Objects can hold value (or have value attributed to them) for various reasons. Here, of course, a conflict arises between a Marxist perspective on the creation of value and one closer to the one advocated by Georg Simmel. The latter would very probably interject that value can never inherently reside within an object but is always subject to human interpretation. To avoid expanding this paper into the length of a book, we will however have to forgo this discussion. For now, our focus in this study will lie on the kind of value that is subject to change.

When an object attains economic value, Appadurai refers to it as a *commodity*. It is important to note that being a commodity represents only one phase in an object's biography.The beginning and the end of this phase is a matter of cultural and individual interpretation. This implies that it can be manipulated on an individual level (Ibid.: 17). This in turn—I would personally like to add—suggests that humans can exert personal influence over objects, even within the context of the large economic structures in which these objects exist.

The exchange and movement of objects by people can be perceived as an everyday action. However, determining *when* and *how* an object becomes desirable and who is entitled to acquiring it leads directly into the realm of politics. Regarding commodities, the ability to determine and regulate their circulation is therefore ultimately a question of power. And

secondly—according to Appadurai—politics serves here as the link between value and exchange in the social life of such commodities (Ibid.: 57). Consequently, rebellion against this power can lead to a shift of value. Then maybe shifts of said economic power —translating into *shifts of value*—can in turn indicate rebellion.

5.4. How the Object shapes the Social

"Do artifacts have politics?" is not only a question we will have to tackle in the following chapter - but also the title of a paper published by Langdon Winner. In said text, Winner attempts to identify the underlying systems which determine whether objects and technology are used according to any kind of political agenda. The author concludes by stating that there are indeed two types of such artifacts: One consisting of objects which are constituted through a flexible set of possibilities in their usage, while the other type of objects appears to be rather static - meaning: dedicated to one specific kind of application (Winner. 1980: 135). While Winner does not forget to add that these two variants may nonetheless be interlinked and interdependent, one hen-or-egg-like question remains when examining objects and technologies: Does the material and technical condition of a particular object constitute certain answers in the social space, or are—the other way around—the utilities of such object dictated by a certain authority, trying to achieve its goals (Ibid.: 131)? While determining whether the answer to this question leans more towards one possibility or rather towards the other one, will ultimately have to be approached by examining each specific case. However, we can deviate from this question that we must invariably consider the socio-political context we find our objects located in. Said context does not only strongly affect the constitution of the object - as we learned in the previous chapter - but it is nevertheless itself influenced by such. While proceeding with the approach of separating objects and humans in exploring the production of agency (going a little head-to-head with Latour), we must still acknowledge that we cannot analyze any environment ignoring the interconnection of these two.

> *"Like all other creatures, human beings do not exist on the 'other side' of materiality, but swim in an ocean of materials. Once we acknowledge our immersion, what this ocean reveals to us is not the bland homogeneity of different shades of matter but a flux in which materials of the most diverse kinds, through processes of admixture and distillation, of coagulation and dispersal, and of*

evaporation and precipitation, undergo continual generation and transformation." (Ingold. 2011: 24)

Generally, Ingold appears to be mostly interested in connections happening though physical experience of the object and human, such as the craftswoman forming wood into furniture while nevertheless having her hands steered by the specific material constitution of the material all throughout the process. However, there are further possibilities of mutual influence other than physical touch when we acknowledge the deep connection between human and material actors, created and reproduced through constant transformation: For instance, mere ownership–or rather, attributed ownership–by a person, can assign a specific meaning to an object (Fogelin, Schiffer. 2015: 820). To provide an everyday example: Consider heirlooms from deceased relatives, which can hardly be looked at without bringing the former owner's face to mind.

Let us dig a bit deeper into this idea:

As foreshadowed earlier, Yael Navaro-Yashin delves deeply into the interplay between objects and people, particularly when both find themselves caught in seemingly overwhelming political processes that they can hardly influence. In her text *Affective Spaces* (2009), she describes the lives of people who have been caught in the Cypriot border conflict. When the Turkish army swiftly captured the northern part of the island, many Cypriots were forced to flee south, leaving behind their homes, land, and everything on it. The Turkish civilians who subsequently moved in and settled in the now-abandoned areas encountered a wealth of left-behind objects, whose connections to people and their fates are nearly impossible to ignore. Both sides are now part of a political process that is larger than their individual lives and which they are, due to their limited power, subjected to. Navaro-Yashin describes in a compelling way how these objects influence their new users. Not only do they reveal, in an archaeological sense, details about the lives of the people who once owned them, but they also actively shape the reality of their new owners through their existence and history (Ibid.: 5). These objects are witness to great political disruption leading to painful consequences to the humans whose lives are interwoven with them - just like the objects we find scattered all over the Passo della Morte. The occurrences and fate of these people did not only play an important role in shaping the objects' current conditions, moreover: they are embedded in them. Similar to Guttari mentioned in the previous chapter, Navaro-Yashin explains how "[...] *melancholia is mediated through objects and non-human environments. Therefore, we can speak, in such instances and historical contingencies, of melancholic objects, things which*

exude an affect of melancholy, and spatial melancholia, an environment or atmosphere which discharges such an affect." (Navaro-Yashin. 2009: 16)

The concept of the object as an actor is not a new idea in social science philosophy. Jane Bennett describes the object as a *body* that interacts with other bodies. The ability of these bodies to influence and respond to one another makes them *affective bodies*. Bennett further explains how these bodies, through their mutual interactions, can form larger entities, which she calls *assemblages*. In their interplay, these assemblages of human and non-human bodies can even reinforce one another or emerge into something greater (Bennet. 2010: 21ff). It is important to mention that by that she was referring to mechanical entities and infrastructures of the human landscape. Yet I would argue that we can safely dwell on the idea that this approach is indeed extendable onto more abstract perspectives. However, Ingold would remind us to use the term *assemblage* carefully, since it too tends to imply stasis (cf.: Ingold. 2015: 7).

Applied to the case of the Cypriot borderlands, the interplay between objects and people appears less like a physical machine and more like an emotional framework that characterizes the aftermath of the Turkish invasion. Yet, not unlike a machine, it is an interwoven process conducted by various actors who ultimately produce a certain effect. In this case *affect,* which plays an integral part in shaping the environment. And here we locate the major difference to Guattari, who describes affect as created independently of political discourses. Instead Navaro-Yashin states:

> *But neither the ruin in my ethnography, nor the people who live around it are affective on their own or in their own right, but both produce and transmit affect relationally. An environment of ruins discharges an affect of melancholy. At the same time, those who inhabit this space of ruins feel melancholic: they put the ruins into discourse, symbolize them, interpret them, politicize them, understand them, project their subjective conflicts onto them, remember them, try to forget them, historicize them, and so on.* (Navaro-Yashin. 2009: 15)

Looking at the *Passo della Morte*, one finds a space filled with a dynamic between objects of flight and people on the move, forming a larger body of dense political tension.
Objects that form a relatively close bond with people can reveal a great deal about their former owners. This bond between an object and a person does not necessarily have to be emotionally intimate. Even items to which their owners feel little attachment can possess this

capacity: This includes utilitarian objects that prove indispensable for survival over a certain period, especially when individuals are exposed to extreme situations or undergoing particularly challenging times. Objects that people in a state of migration recognize as belonging to them can serve to bind together what is most disparate. They may hold contradictions and fractures, but they are of particular importance to the stories of migrants and, by extension, to the history of modernity (Bischoff. 2018: 80).

At the *Border Spot*, the place along the Via Aurelia, right where the Via Woronoff leads up to the village of Grimaldi, I met a man named Frederic who was traveling with three suitcases. One of them was smaller and had childish designs printed on it. Recovering from a pushback hardly 30 minutes before, he explained that his wife and daughter had already crossed the border but were unable to take their luggage with them. The suitcases, however, contained important belongings, especially their documents. Although carrying these two additional suitcases undoubtedly reduced his chances of crossing the border, as they were heavy and made him more conspicuous to border officials, he was determined to bring all the suitcases across.

When a person's circumstances change, something that often happens rather suddenly in extreme situations, it can also be assumed that objects in close relationships with them undergo transformation. A sudden shift in the value of an object, for example, reflects a change in the situation of the person interacting with said object. For instance, it may become necessary for someone on a migration route to turn a t-shirt, which previously held at least practical, if not emotional, value, into trash discarded along the edge of the Passo della Morte. For people fleeing or living in exile, objects take on special significance. It is self-evident that certain items, such as water bottles, practical clothing, or the necessary documents, become more vital than ever for survival. On a personal level, however, a carried object can also produce a sense of safety and trust in unfamiliar places. Conversely, leaving behind an important or beloved item can hold great meaning, as it may accentuate the now insurmountable boundary to a former life or mark an irrevocable rupture (Bischoff. 2018: 72). Life-altering events that sweep over people can force them to part with their objects or, in some cases, compel them to hold on to them. The ability to decide on the value, use, and ownership—or lack thereof—of objects, particularly against the demands of an external power, implies discourses concerning agency and the autonomy to assert it.

As Navaro-Yashin has explained above, the affect emanating from these objects emerges only in relation to their surroundings. The three suitcases that Frederic had to carry unfold their

impact through their interaction with Frederic and the people they encounter. This is an interaction deeply embedded in the context of the family's separation. The value ascribed to both the objects within the suitcases and the suitcases themselves is similarly shaped by the situational framework. Each actor engaged in this moment of contact is, in turn, embedded in complex and ever-shifting relationships. The suitcase itself may not possess agency in its own right, but where its contexts intersect with those of Frederic, Ingold would ultimately locate the emergence of such agency. Latour's analysis of said situation would in turn rather emphasize on the agency-bearing action that evolves in between all involved actants (the man and the suitcases constituting some of them). Yet by that, the focus would shift away from the individual histories embedded in the context of Frederic`s and his suitcases' biographies; which are crucial for our analysis.

5.5. Creating the Environment

We have now examined the relationship between object-like and human actors, as well as their interactions. But where exactly do these interactions take place? Are there specific conditions for the entanglement of complex systems, or is the meshwork *itself* the very ground of action? The spider from Chapter 2, which earlier joined our travel group, recalls its web; the structure in which the fly was caught and ultimately consumed: Without this web, the interaction between the fly and the spider would not have been possible. Action, therefore, cannot take place unconditionally in a vacuum; it requires an environment for it to unfold. Ingold elaborates:



Figure 18: Dozens of bags and suitcases can be found along the Passo

> "*It is simply to recognise that for things to interact they must be immersed in a kind of force field set up by the currents of the media that surround them. Cut out from these currents – that is, reduced to objects – they would be dead. Having deadened the meshwork by cutting its lines of force, thus breaking it into a thousand pieces, you cannot pretend to bring it back to life by sprinkling a magical dust of 'agency' around the fragments.*" (Ingold. 2011: 93)

Latour and I, however, note that the spider's web, which it must occupy to engage in prey-catching interactions, does not simply exist; it has been spun by the spider itself. This

raises the question: How can the spider create the very conditions necessary for its own existence in the first place? The answer lies in the fact that neither the spider nor its web exists in a finite, dualistic relationship. Both are embedded in the continuous movement that unfolds around *and through* them. The environment, which provides the conditions for the emergence of agency, is itself part of the processes of emergence. It is not only influenced by them but is in a constant state of *becoming*.

To move away from the abstract discourse and toward a more concrete, physically experienced space, Ingold further adds:

> "[...] *in a landscape, each component enfolds within its essence the totality of its relations with each and every other*." (Ingold. 1993: 154)

The landscape he refers to is thus not merely a quantitatively measurable space but a process that unfolds along qualitative dimensions (Ibid.). To grasp it—and to situate the interactions occurring within it—one must be willing to let the landscape narrate its own history, or indeed, to understand the landscape itself as a story (Ibid.: 152). Ultimately, space as well as roads, paths, and trails do not simply *exist*. Like the biographies of people and objects that move along with them, which must be understood as processes (cf.: Kopytoff. 1986), the path itself should also not be considered static. Of course, the physical geography is governed by the administration of Ventimiglia, various estates along the path are officially and institutionally owned by locals and the fence on top of the ridge most definitely is to be seen as property of the French state. And of course, there are very traditional ways to mark ownership as through physical exercise of power through violence; practiced for instance by a police car guarding the beginning of the path in 2015. However, referring to institutional property certificates and the assertion of such through authorities, will certainly not suffice when we aim to understand which actors actively exert influence over this space. Neither the Passo's ownership (if this term is even adequate at all) nor its mere existence are fixed. Instead, it appears a great deal more fruitful to perceive the environment as created and reproduced through its use or rather through actors interacting and thus creating agency. This raises questions about who or what uses a path, for what purpose, and which resources and *how many of them* are utilized for this endeavor. Furthermore, the process of usage (or shaping) itself should not be ignored, especially when it is culturally significant and/or occurs in competition with others who use the same path. If we acknowledge the process-like nature of physical and imagined space per se, we come to understand that "*places are not static but are continuously renegotiated and that multiple interpretations and narratives of places may*

coexist." (Palmberger. 2022: 93) Therefore, specifically at this path with its long history of border regimes and overcoming of such, we must perceive "*placemaking as a relational practice to which social dissonance and contestation are integral*." (Ibid: 94) In order to approach the particular act of creating space, accessing some more anthropological work can help.



Figure 19

For instance, we can look at how Argounova-Low describes the creation and shaping of Siberian roads through the trucks that traverse them. The drivers of these machines struggle against snow, weather, and other environmental factors. To achieve their goals, they rely on specific - sometimes inherited - knowledge and establish relationships with their vehicles and other drivers (Argounova-Low. 2012: 77ff). In this combative process of creation through expansion by usage, we see a parallel to our field: those actors who use the Passo della Morte to overcome a border regime, do so against the resistance of other users of the path, as much as of objects related to them and last but not least: all together against the resistance of the path itself. Furthermore, Noel B. Salazar, engaging with notions of traveling, points out how the act of translocal mobility alone cannot be grasped as a simple movement from one point to another, but is instead constituted through cultural meaning production and discourse around it (2018: 10). Hence, not only the starting points and destinations of a journey, as much the places being traversed in the process, are objects of social discourse but additionally the travel itself, which makes them altogether interesting in terms of politics.

Naturally, the path is also used and shaped by actors whose goals are diametrically opposed to those of border crossing. These actors, too, rely on a system of knowledge and allies to shape the space in ways that hinder its use by people migrating, Passeurs, and open-border activists. Beyond this, the path contains barriers whose origins are not explicitly political or ideological, but which influence usage on both sides: steep cliffs, misleading turns, and dense brush. These not only hinder the monitoring of the space by police and military forces or the construction of border infrastructure but also limit the number of passable routes. On the other hand, people on the move can use the terrain to hide during their crossing, yet they are also

constantly at risk of taking a wrong turn or even falling down the cliffs. The space itself reflects its influence back onto the bodies—both human and non-human—who took part in shaping the space. The inherent dynamics of the path force actors to adapt their strategies of appropriation, as well regarding tactical adjustments, but also in terms of perception of the environment and embodied reactions to the latter. Since the path itself is not simply a static object, but does evolve through its multirelational usage by people, the same must apply to the objects found along the path. Perceiving geography as a process rather than as a given condition allows us to better approach its components. Objects are part of the area they are found in and therefore play a significant role in shaping the landscape hand in hand with human actors (cf.: Ingold. 2002: 247ff).

What unfolds before us is a web of delicate, interdependent, and reciprocal relationships. However, this meshwork does not make the topic at hand very easy to approach in terms of research, yet it does reveal the density of dynamic political processes at work along only five kilometers of trail. At this point, it is crucial to emphasize once again: The environment that is in a constant state of *becoming* is not to be understood as the result of random encounters between actors within an arbitrarily chosen field. The Passo thus has to be approached with regard to its history of engagement in the European political landscape.Moreover, the actors walking and shaping it are carrying ideological and individual affiliations. It is therefore unfeasible to examine the field in isolation from its political struggles. Reflecting the term *activist* might prove quite interesting to discuss some of the ideological affiliations. Following the ideas of both Latour and Ingold, an activist can be defined as an actor whose actions are particularly purposive in terms of political change. Yet, for Latour said change (action) is ultimately facilitated equally by the activist as well as other actors involved in the network; such as other individuals and objects, including involved equipment. Ingold in turn would pay more tribute to the entanglement of the activist in global and historical processes. An activist is then to be understood as an actor who, when engaging in action, would do it out of greater consciousness for the interdependent lines of economic, social and political factors operating beyond the scale of one particular interaction. However, also due to her* entanglement in these lines but also because of their global dimension, the activist cannot observe and understand all the conditions of the political environment; she* is consequently not able to exercise total control on neither the agency she* is involved in producing, nor the outcome of such.

I argue that in consequence we should concentrate on what emerges from the multitude of individual (and often unconscious) interactions and which is to be understood (not despite, but *because* of its many contradictions) simultaneously as its own working system in itself, as well as a multitude of systems. Hence, the interplay of objects, geographical conditions, and human actors leads to the emergence of systems that facilitate mobility in some instances while restricting it in others. Brian Larkin would refer to this system—one that (to varying degrees) governs the mobility of people, objects, and ideas—as infrastructure (Larkin. 2013: 328). According to him, what constitutes infrastructure"[...] *is that they are objects that create the grounds on which other objects operate, and when they do so they operate as systems.*" (Larkin. 2013: 329)

Although these systems are based on the interaction of multiple actors, including objects, they do not necessarily have to take on a physically tangible form and can, in fact, be of a social nature (Ibid.: 338). Furthermore, their operations can remain largely invisible and therefore difficult to grasp (Ibid.: 336). What appears to be essential though, is their functioning across multiple levels, where actors are interconnected. Here, we observe an intriguing parallel to Ingold's spider web: On the one hand, the web is to be perceived as an object, but on the other hand it manages to enable the interaction of other objects. Moreover, as an object, it is itself part of the meshwork that constitutes action and agency, while simultaneously serving as the very condition for interaction between actors. It is only through the web that the fly and the spider can engage in the act of predation, and at the same time, the web itself participates as an object in this interaction. It is the necessary condition for existential action between actors, yet it must also be produced by these very actors.

Larkin, who specifically examines the political and aesthetic dimensions of infrastructure, provides a handy definition in this regard. Infrastructure appears as a system that is produced and reproduced through complex and multifaceted processes, while also forming the framework for intricate political processes that unfold upon it. In its political substance and its capacity to enable political action, we find yet another parallel between infrastructure and the discourses surrounding the Passo della Morte:

> "*They form us as subjects not just on a technopolitical level but also through this mobilization of affect and the senses of desire, pride, and frustration, feelings which can be deeply political*." (Larkin. 2013: 333)

However, viewing the environment of the path through Larkin's lens of mobility infrastructure does not resolve a fundamental contradiction: we see that actors with vastly different ideologies, through their interactions (one might say collectively), contribute to the creation of a system. At the Passo della Morte, we encounter actors who facilitate mobility, such as passeurs, markings, and open-border activists. Simultaneously, however, we also find actors and aspects who seem to work against it, such as border police, fences, and misinformation; allegedly placed by anti-immigration activists. How can these apparently opposing forces be reconciled?

To approach this question, I would like to introduce Mark B. Salter into the discussion at the conclusion of this chapter. In a similar vein as this study, Salter's work shifts the focus away from individual actors in the field of transnational mobility and toward the system that underlies them. According to him, border regimes are not merely characterized by either stasis or mobility, but by something he terms *circulation*[12] (Salter. 2013: 8f). In fact, his concept leaves room for both Ingold and Latour: circulation systems, he argues, are constituted through assemblages in rhizomatic networks composed of numerous interwoven actors (Ibid.: 12). Here, we find components resembling both Latour's network and the entanglement of Ingold's meshwork.

The apparent contradiction in Salter's concept lies in the fact that visible mobility is not necessarily an indicator of freedom, just as a closed border does not imply that movement is absent. However, this contradiction dissolves once we recognize that both the potential for fluctuation and migration, as well as the capacity to restrict them, are integral parts of a complex system. The key insight is that systems governing mobility must remain functional even when mobility is suddenly constrained (Ibid.: 10). Similarly, the infrastructure of the Passo della Morte does not fit neatly into either category. Of course, at its core, it is a hiking trail, a space of movement. But at the same time, we find countless traces indicating that people have lingered here for extended periods: the remnants of camps along the path, ruins that have been temporarily inhabited. Ultimately, the Passo della Morte is not only a *route* but also a *place*. Successful migration for people on the move, therefore, does not simply mean autonomously moving from A to B, but rather participating within systems:

[12] Naturally Salter was not the first to coin the term circulation as a concept which contains mobility and stasis simultaneously and therefore serves as an alternative to the concept of migration versus stagnation. Salazar points here to Mansell Prothero and Murray Chapman who defined this term in 1985 (Salazar. 2018: 2, cf.:).

> "*For example, the potential for international mobility is not simply in crossing geopolitical borders or engaging transnational networks: international mobility requires an imagining and self-concept of mobility, assertion of identity and the ability to translate that into verifiable identity documents, the authentication of status and the authorization to travel, the amassing of social and economic capital to enter the network, and the capability to engage with agents of control throughout the system*." (Salter. 2013: 18)

Conversely, for actors of the French state it will not suffice to close a barrier once or patch up a border fence. It requires coordinated and reactive actions from a multitude of actors. Moreover, the systems contained in the border environment necessitate their own constant reproduction through the continuous repetition of these actions:

> "*The border, be it state or biopolitical, is precisely constituted through repeated decisions of inclusion and exclusion, entry and exit, and what is vital for the authority of the state is not a particular decision either in its correctness or in its political import, but in the repetition of the authority to decide*." (Salter. 2013: 12)

For instance, the physical infrastructure of border controls is to be understood as a site of circulation: borders may be temporarily opened for some people while, on different occasions, other people end up in the *zone d'attente* (Ibid.: 13ff). According to Salter, mobility and stasis can—indeed, must—exist simultaneously. The crucial question, however, is: For whom do these conditions apply, and at what moment? And perhaps even more importantly: Which actors and interests exert greater influence over the production and transformation of this system? Like Salter, I argue that the answer can hardly be found in individual decision-makers within the French state, nor in migrating individuals themselves. Instead, we must turn our attention to the system in which all actors interact and collectively contribute to its production.

Suddenly, Latour again takes the floor by pointing out that all this talk about *this* System or *the* System would imply that we are referring to only *one* self-contained entity, which then in turn must be clearly distinguishable from other such entities. He agrees with Larkin that objects not only enable the functionality of systems but are themselves constitutive of those systems. Latour also expresses his appreciation to Salter for the important addition that highly complex and far-reaching interactional constellations, such as those observed at the border, do not persist in spite of their apparent contradictions, but because of them. Or rather: that the

very capacity to process and accommodate contradiction must be constitutive of such formations. However, when systems are described as closed or self-contained, Latour (perceiving himself as an interactionist) feels misunderstood (Latour. 2001: 237). These systems are not structures imposed "from above" (for example, by the French state), within which actants are then permitted to operate. Instead, such systems emerge through the interactions of the actants themselves (who then in the course of the network become *actors*). Infrastructure, such as that found at the border post, may allow interaction to be locally framed, localized; meaning momentarily bounded (Latour. 2001: 242f), but the relations between actants extend beyond both the spatial and temporal confines of individual interactions. These systems are therefore simultaneously *delocalised*.

One might accuse Latour's networks of a certain degree of conceptual stasis, but the systems that enable complex human and non-human interaction are by no means to be understood as fixed or clearly delineated. Rather, they are composed of networks that are themselves embedded within and part of other networks (Latour. 2001: 247f). Much like in Ingold's thinking, the analytical focus here lies on interaction: because only the latter gives rise to systems, not the other way around. If we are to speak of a boundary between systems at all, it can only be in the sense of an imagined membrane: temporary and porous at the same time (Latour. 2001: 237). Ingold and the spider would nod in agreement, though for them, this does not yet go far enough. Even the temporary localisation and thus delimitation of interactions—and by extension—of *systems*, obscures the ongoing processuality and inherent movement of the elements involved. Since, for them, in the compositions of the environment as much as in its systems, and "*In the life of lines, parts are not components; they are movements*." (Ingold. 2015: 7)

For a system to be viable, it must remain open, interactive, and therefore not rigidly bound. Both perspectives concur that it is interaction that enables systems, and not the other way around; but when it comes to the question of symmetry among the interacting entities, our little discursive gathering once more finds little agreement. Turning to the spider by reminding it about the fly it sought to consume, we must ask: Is the spider's web merely a neutral environment that facilitates agency between the inhabiting spider and the trapped fly? After all, in the production of the web, the spider played a far more significant role than the fly; more than that, the web undoubtedly serves the spider's interests to a much greater extent than those of the fly. In the same way, the zone d'attente may be a site of interaction between

the police and people on the move, but it certainly does not benefit the latter's interests equally.



Figure 20

I argue that merely examining the web upon which the spider sits and the air through which the fly moves is insufficient to understand the environment as the foundation of agency production. A more productive approach is to consider how both of these (let us, for now, call them) *conditions* are interconnected, forming a forest environment composed of complex and often contradictory interests. Similarly, the border region of Ventimiglia constitutes assemblages of competing interests and shifting power dynamics.

Let us, therefore, turn our attention back to the Passo della Morte; to its human actors, its infrastructure, and, with greatest focus, to its objects.

6. Objects and Infrastructure of the Passo

As part of my research, I traversed the Passo della Morte in late winter 2021, in the summer of 2023, and again in the spring of 2025. On each occasion, it became apparent that this path, though only approximately five kilometers in length, is densely populated with a striking array of objects and symbols throughout its entirety. Ultimately, however, I was compelled to narrow my focus to a small selection of these materials. The most obvious reason for limiting the sample, of course, is that I do not intend to present the esteemed reader with a ten-volume tome.

Yet, if we understand the objects encountered along this path as components of a larger entanglement, it quickly becomes more manifest that some degree of selection is not only practical but necessary. The Passo della Morte simultaneously serves as an environment for a meshwork to emerge upon, as infrastructure facilitating agency and ultimately, it is a part of these actions itself. It is a site of considerable complexity. The processes and objects that take shape here and which simultaneously serve as traces of other actors' interventions are part of larger assemblages that have persisted over time. It is, by nature, constantly subject to

transformation. Investigating an ostensibly fixed "present" state thus requires a deliberate selection, accompanied by critical reflection on which objects and temporalities are being excluded from analysis (Larkin. 2013: 330).

> "*Because the basic object of infrastructure is so diverse and can be analyzed in so many different ways, the choice of methodology is a theoretical question*" (Larkin. 2013: 338)

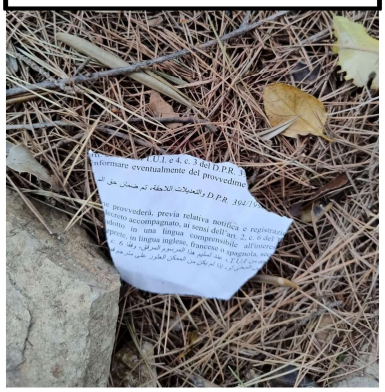
Latour would certainly agree with this, and furthermore be quick to emphasize that he conceives of his Actor-Network Theory as a methodology for inquiry rather than as an explanatory framework for outcomes (Latour. 2010: 245). In selecting the research objects, I therefore paid close attention to ensuring that each of them offers a particular perspective on the processes of adaptation and appropriation at the border. Even within the constraints of a limited sample, the goal was to minimize the loss of knowledge as far as possible.

One final point deserves emphasis: the objects discussed below are significant not only for their symbolic or interpretive value, but also because their very presence contributes to the physical shaping of the site. The objects selected are those that stood out both during my repeated hikes along the path and in the conversations and interviews conducted in the course of the research.

6.1. Scraps of Paper and other Documents

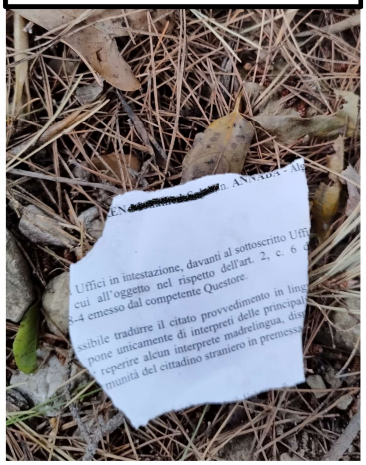
The first attempt to cross the border into France typically takes place via public and institutional infrastructure; most commonly by train. In this regard, my findings are consistent with the existing literature on the region (cf.: Bonnin. 2021: 81). Very few individuals arrive in Ventimiglia with the intention of crossing the border via the Passo della Morte. Rather, the path appears to come into play only after several failed attempts to cross via the formal transportation network; usually followed by pushbacks. Indeed, the physical location of the path lends itself well to an immediate attempt on foot following a rejection by border officials. The Via Woronoff, which branches off from Via Aurelia and passes through Grimaldi, begins less than fifteen minutes walk from the Italian border post and the zone

Figure 21: Dublin III information and threat of punishment in case of noncompliance



d'attente managed by the French police. As a result, it is not uncommon to see individuals, freshly released from the police containers, beginning their ascent toward Grimaldi and onward to the Passo. Consequently, many people on the move carry with them the documents issued by migration authorities; often received only hours before. These documents then accumulate along the path in the hundreds, scattered on the ground. They are usually torn, crumpled, or otherwise altered, rendering them difficult to identify or trace. As part of my research, I examined many of these papers in detail, insofar as their contents remained legible. They included documents from both Italian and French authorities: numbered registration slips from Lampedusa, medical examination records from Sardinia, and various other forms. Some were dated only a few hours—or a day—prior, bearing witness to the recent experiences of the person who discarded them. Among the most common are information sheets issued by the French police during the process of "refoulement," typically justified under the Dublin Regulation. There are also Italian interrogation protocols issued through the *Centro di Cooperazione di Polizia e Dogana*, which individuals pass through after being returned by French authorities. Still other papers communicate, upon re-entry into Italian territory, a formal order—under threat of penalty—to report to the immigration office at the *Questura* of Imperia within seven days. The abundance and diversity of these traces offer a stark representation of the bureaucratic procedures governing migration law. Crumpled detention slips lie beside shredded identification notices. These documents can be found all along the path, up to the border fence itself; strewn among discarded clothing, along the trail's edge, or tangled in thorny brush on the slope. At times, it is evident that a document was torn only moments earlier, with fragments still gathered in small, deliberate piles on the ground. These hundreds of slips and thousands of paper fragments are of particular interest to the anthropological gaze. Their formal character reveals the time, date, and place of their issuance. We can see who produced them, who processed them, and into whose possession they ultimately passed. They stand as witnesses to the political and legal operations at the border. The identification forms issued by the French police testify to the state's refusal to

Figure 22: interrogation transcript of an Algerian man at San Ludovico border station.



assume responsibility for asylum procedures, while the Italian documents illustrate how this responsibility—at least formally—is handed back to Italy. The individuals at the center of these procedures are compelled, under threat of punishment, to submit to this bureaucratic process.

Naturally, the document samples included in this small archaeological study cannot claim to be fully representative. The sheer volume of material makes it impossible to examine every item in detail or to establish precise quantitative comparisons. Nevertheless, one notable observation stands out: since 2023, the number of so-called *refus d'entrée* documents appears to have declined significantly. While these were once the most common form found along the path, I did not encounter a single one during my 2025 field visit. This likely correlates with the shift in the legal landscape following the European Court of Human Rights' condemnation of French police practices in autumn 2023 (cf.: Dylla. 2023).

The *Passo della Morte* is saturated with traces of Europe's political condition; of the conflict between the Italian and French states. These documents lay bare the administrative logic behind that condition and hint at the tension between the protection of individual rights and the purported interests of state institutions. Yet beyond that, they also offer insight into the condition of the individuals to whom they were addressed. Almost without exception, these documents list personal data such as age, name, and nationality. In some cases, this data is encoded; for instance, through identification numbers within biometric registration systems. These are personalized documents, issued by state power to determine the individual's fate within the system. They establish a connection between those who leave them behind and those who find them. An activist named Camilo described how the sheer volume of personalized papers forced him to confront his own privileges on a daily basis. Another Activist, Remon, meanwhile, recounted how, despite the "numbness" cultivated through prolonged exposure in the field, the sight of a document belonging to someone who shared his mother's country of origin suddenly triggered intense emotional responses. These documents do not only carry legal implications; they are also deeply affective and melancholic.

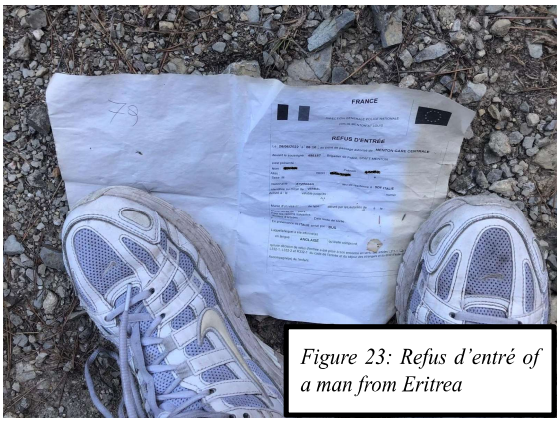


Figure 23: Refus d'entré of a man from Eritrea

Why, then, do we find them scattered across the path like litter at the roadside?

Keeping in mind the formal logic of the border regime will remain important going forward. However, for the purpose of analysis, I adopt an approach similar to the one Navaro-Yashin proposed in her 2012 book:

> "*Rather than consider the contoured and formal aesthetics of documents [...], I am interested in exploring the multiple and contingent affects that documents engender in their holders and transactors."* (Navaro-Yashin. 2023: 125)

The focus of the analysis, then, is to be placed less on the formal content of the documents themselves and more on the effects they produce, on the actors who encounter them and the environments in which they circulate. The sociopolitical reality to which these documents refer forms the structural backdrop against which their effects are to be situated. Naturally, it is essential to acknowledge that these documents differ in their function and in their consequences for the individuals who receive them. What they share, however, is their role within a process into which recipients are forcibly inserted; a process marked by deep ambiguity and characterized by a multiplicity of actors and legal mechanisms operating in parallel or in cooperation. These mechanisms exert significant pressure on individuals, even as they nominally contain provisions intended to uphold individual rights and ensure access to basic services. In practice, however, this system often works directly against the broader goals of its recipients; namely, the ability to continue traveling through EU countries and to eventually settle at their intended destination. The mixture of opacity and antagonism embedded in these documents is palpable and has a powerful impact on people on the move. Among those who passed by the Border Spot along the Via Aurelia after a pushback, uncertainty about the meaning and implications of the papers they carried was common. Often, individuals would show their documents to activists without being prompted, asking for their interpretation or seeking advice on how to proceed. In cases where the papers in question were refus d'entrée notices issued by the French police, activists would generally attempt to reassure them: such notices essentially stated that the individual was not welcome on French territory but had limited further consequences; at least according to the shared understanding among activists. In contrast, documents with more complex legal implications typically prompted a referral to *Caritas* for specialized legal advice.



Figure 24: Lampedusa registration number

The effects these documents had on their recipients were nonetheless real—manifested, for example, in expressions of fear—even when their legal weight could, in some cases, be downplayed or disregarded.

> *"Documents, among the material objects of law and governance, are affectively charged phenomena. They are not self-contained or sterile; rather, they transmit specific kinds of energy among their users. Documents may become interiorized objects in their transactors. They get transformed; they take other shapes.*" (Navaro-Yashin. 2012: 125f)

As Navaro-Yashin suggests, the effect of these documents cannot be understood solely through their specific content, but must instead be situated within their broader context: namely that of being subject to a complex bureaucratic machinery that appears to operate against one's own interests, and whose inner workings remain largely opaque. The very attempt to make sense of these procedures, and to navigate the system in order to reach one's own objectives, may seem futile from the outset.

The documents bear witness to the internal contradictions and incoherencies of European migration policy; contradictions that, for *people on the move*, become materially and existentially tangible in Ventimiglia. They convey and perform a sense of procedural legitimacy at the border. However, this 'legitimacy' is sharply contested by other actors involved in the field, including migrants and activists, many of whom perceive these practices as fundamentally unjust.

> "*Documents are among the primary paraphernalia of modern states and legal systems: they are its material culture. A wannabe 'state' would have to produce documents too, in order to look and act like a state.*" (Navaro-Yashin. 2007: 84)

6.1.1. Stuck between Systems

The situation in Ventimiglia exemplifies the failure of short-sighted international policy (cf.: Rinauro. 2021: 39). The Dublin Agreements, which have been periodically updated since the 1990s, are formally intended to reconcile asylum procedures with intra-European freedom of movement. In practice, however, they shift responsibility onto those countries whose borders also serve as the EU's external boundaries. This creates a dual problem: the overburdening of certain states alongside the abdication of responsibility by others (cf.: Kleinjung. 2015). At

the Italian-French border, this manifests as Italy's apparent unwillingness in recent years to handle all asylum applications from migrants and refugees who first set foot on European soil via its shores. This reluctance collides with France's national interests, which, citing the Dublin regulations, refuse entry to individuals at its border whose initial registration occurred on Italian soil (cf.: Bundesamt für Fremdenwesen und Asyl. 2013; UNHCR (2)).

Solutions to these complex situations must often be developed at the micro-level to address daily challenges. These solutions become apparent in how French and Italian border officials interpret and apply European law. In the case of Ventimiglia, the enforcement of the rule of law, as well as the extent to which it is applied, appears to adjust to shifting circumstances at both the international and local levels. The real victims in this scenario are those individuals detained by police or military forces at the border; individuals who, with their first step onto Italian soil, were involuntarily (and sometimes unknowingly (Cf.: Aru. 2021b: 164)) drawn into the intricate machinery of European asylum law. Regarding the mechanisms at this border, their personal interests often collide with the procedure, leaving them to bear the consequences.

> "*Ventimiglia is one instance where this fragmentation, subject to continuous and "irregular" mutations, is particularly visible*" (Donadio. 2021: 130)

In the aftermath of a pushback many individuals shared experiences with me they described as humiliating, such as the denial of basic necessities during their detention, as well as instances of physical and psychological violence. It was common to hear reports of police conduct perceived as both harassing and illegal, even though the documents issued to them formally assert that the procedure was carried out within the bounds of legality. That institutionalized legality is, in fact, subject to negotiation and transformation is further suggested by allegations made by the French legal aid NGO Anafé, which claims that in some cases, refus d'entrée documents are pre-filled by the police to state that the individual in question is voluntarily returning to Italy (cf.: Anafé (2). 2019: 57). In this way, people on the move are paradoxically made to endorse, through their signature, a procedure that does not reflect their will. When asked about these documents, activist Remon explained to me:

> *"I think for them it's a mandatory thing to do but it's really worth nothing sometimes. You do see these documents for example on people who are pushed back. And this was happening […] with especially minors that were being pushed back. The police would then put a wrong birth date on the Pushback paper and it would be by*

coincidence a birth date which made them not a minor but just someone that's an adult" (Interview with Remon)

The background here is that police authorities are legally obligated to treat minors at the border differently. Formally, border agents have no legal basis for returning underage individuals to Italy. As a result, activists at the border repeatedly encountered individuals who claimed—and appeared—to be minors, yet whose registration documents stated that they were precisely 18 years old.

In response, open-border activists adapted their strategies, striving to obtain institutionally recognized proof of age, such as birth certificates. In such cases, Italian border officers would then prevent the minors from re-entering Italy and instead send them back to their French counterparts. This practice, sarcastically referred to by some activists as "ping-pong," has become a systemic strategy; one that operates within the legal frameworks recognized by state actors while simultaneously attempting to exploit the juridical grey zones of the Franco-Italian border conflict. The youths themselves, however, become the pawn in this cynical game, or toput it with the words Activist Remon used:

"*In general, crossing the border is a cat and mouse game in my opinion.*" (Interview with Remon)

The systems of circulation are difficult to grasp. Navigating them requires a form of capital—specifically, knowledge—and a constant adaptation to the ever-shifting rules of the game. Activists operate tactically within a framework of both resistance to and cooperation with the prevailing legal systems, while actors within the border regime itself appear to move within a similarly paradoxical structure; one that oscillates between legality and illegality[13]. The documents, by contrast, may be opaque in their juridical meaning, yet they remain physically tangible and experientially immediate:

"*I argue that state-like structures make themselves evident to the people who inhabit their domains in the form of materialities. Documents are among the most tangible phenomena that induce state-like effects.*" (Navaro-Yashin. 2012: 124)

The border regime is manifested in these objects; it can be physically engaged with and manipulated. Unlike the systems operating at the frontier, which require a foundational body

[13] The inherent inconsistency regarding legality and illegality seems somewhat constitutional for the regimes of European border protection, as authors such as Peter O'Brien have pointed out (cf.: O'Brien. 2019: 55).

of knowledge that many people stranded in Ventimiglia often lack (Donadio. 2021: 127), the act of discarding documents offers a means of informal, physically tangible protest. For people on the move, the affect emanating from these objects is often perceived as threatening, yet from a legal standpoint: "[...] *getting the pushback paper was really not important for them, the most important thing for them was just to get over the border."* (Interview with Remon)

Objects do not exist in a vacuum. In order to understand them, they must be considered in relation to other actors and within the context of the system in which they circulate. In the case of commodities, these include, among other things, systems of economic value production; in the case of legal documents, meaning is generated within the context of state politics. As Appadurai previously argued, a sudden shift in value indicates a rebellion against the dominant actors (cf.: Appadurai. 1986: 57). The rejection of the value of border documents, along with the associated rejection of the systems of the border regime, must therefore be interpreted as a form of protest. When documents represent the tangible material culture of state enforcement (Navaro-Yashin. 2007: 84), the destruction of these objects—at least under the given circumstances—implies a rejection of the normality under which the international system of border control disguises itself (cf.: Navaro-Yashin. 2003: 115).



Figure 25

The countless documents along the path thus not only speak to the nature of the environment but also to the reactions of the actors moving through them. However, we can only grasp these if we examine the processes embedded within what Latour calls networks and Ingold refers to as meshworks. The act of handing over or discarding a document does not in itself imply agency. Yet, within the context of the system that evolves through interaction among the many actors, we recognize the actions that emerge from the interplay of these actors. Objects made of paper play a crucial role in the actions that produce both the systems of the border regime and the systems of resistance to it.

> "*Documents are affective: they produce and effect affect. They take the shape of or transform into affect and become part of their handlers in that way*." (Navaro-Yashin. 2007: 95)

We encounter a multidimensional engagement with the processes of legality at the border. The contradictions within the agendas of state actors are reflected in the legal procedures that are made tangible and comprehensible through paper. The paper along the Passo della Morte is not merely a medium through which the rules and impositions of the executive are communicated. Instead, it is an "incarnation" of these rules, physically engaging with its recipients and becoming an experience in itself (cf.: Navaro-Yashin. 2012). This enables a highly localized interaction between the Italian and French legal systems (which consist of both human and non-human components) with people along the Passo. Here, a vast, opaque network in the sense described by Latour suddenly becomes much smaller and more comprehensible. Moreover, it allows people on the move to respond more effectively, meaning: to tactically *engage* in the negotiation.

> "*Papers, especially written and official documentation, bear the symbolism of permanence in west European contexts. Printed, hand-written, and/or signed documentation carries the image of proof, stability, and durability.*" (Navaro-Yashin. 2007: 84)

The destruction of these manifestations of statehood is thus not merely an act of discarding, but an act of active rejection: both in terms of content and, more importantly, a rejection of the general conception of the stability and durability of these papers. Walter Benjamin, who tragically passed away while clandestinely crossing a mountain path to escape fascism, wrote about the notion of perceived normality and prosaicness:

> *"The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule."* (Benjamin. 2007(1942): 257)

We can extract from that how the stability and normality that these manifestations of state law seem to offer to citizens, never applied to people forced to live outside of juridical protection. Hence, resisting the border regime and its papers becomes self-evident. It is not necessarily relevant whether this act occurs consciously or incidentally. According to both Latour and Ingold, it is the interaction itself that constitutes agency and, with it, resistance. Furthermore, these papers not only testify to an abstract rule over people; they also testify to the people themselves; specifically to their identity, translated into administrative codes, and to their stories and actions. They prove the presence of people with names, legal statuses, and countries of origin. They evoke emotions in those who find them, actively contributing to both the melancholy and the revitalization of the place.

What is particularly remarkable about the Passo itself is revealed in its ability not only to be an actor in this process but also to provide a framework—a system in the sense described by Latour—for this process to unfold. Thus, a negotiation with global ramifications can occur within a more localized network, giving greater meaning to the interaction of individual objects and people, while temporarily limiting them to a demarcated space. The documents themselves, in turn, also offer something in return. The Passo is not a geographically defined space administratively imposed from "above," but is actively produced from "below" – and this is already demonstrated by the sheer number of objects that indicate the paths people have taken to reach France via this route. Here too, Latour and Ingold would likely agree. However, Ingold would further argue that clearly defined roles and frameworks within this environment would not do justice to the constant transformation of all involved. Identity documents, identity bearers, and the transit space are mutually transformed, translated, interpreted, and influenced. They bear witness to movement, they create movement, and they *consist of* movement.

6.2. Clothing and Everyday Items

Everyday objects are undoubtedly the most prominent items found along the path. Wanderers come across dozens of toothbrushes, backpacks, and suitcases as well as hundreds of pants, shirts, and underwear. Scattered between them are food wrappers, leftover meals, and (during my last visit) on average, a plastic bottle every 30 meters along the Passo. Their presence accompanies the traveler from the beginning to the end of the path.

> "*[...] there're specific places where people rest, I think. Where there's like a larger heap of trash or things concentrate a little bit. But throughout the path I would see these suitcases that are broken and open. A lot of shoes… also broken shoes, [...] it makes you wonder what the stories are behind those items.*" (Interview with Camilo)

These objects allow for inferences about the processes at play: Particularly near locations along the narrow path that offer a bit more space, they tend to appear in greater clusters. By following them, one not only traces the steps of people attempting to cross the border but also gains insight into places where individuals rest or hide while waiting for an opportunity to cross. The ruined buildings along the path are filled with everyday objects, bearing witness to

the presence of people (cf.: Barnabà. 2024: 80). At first glance, these objects may appear to be mere trash. Yet, they carry the stories of the people and their circumstances. Their sight is unsettling, as they radiate an intense atmosphere, similar to the abandoned objects described by Navaro-Yashin (2009) in Cyprus. The individual reasons for leaving behind clothing are difficult to capture through fieldwork, as it is not easy to find people in Ventimiglia who have been caught crossing the pass and sent back across the border to Ventimiglia. Those people on the move who succeed in crossing understandably no longer remain in the area. However, activists in the territory suggested that a plausible reason might be that police on the French side prefer to target people whose appearance suggests they have been traveling for a long time. In contrast, identifiable tourists and commuters are less likely to be victims of police checks (cf.: Bonnin. 2021: 85; Amigoni, Palmas. 2023: 1067). Practical clothing that allows for mobility, backpacks, and travel essentials like toothbrushes are not static objects. They move with their bearers, and their meaning is not fixed but shaped by each period of their biography. A toothbrush in a glass on a sink symbolizes home and belonging (as anyone whose partner has first placed their toothbrush in their home knows). Hidden in a backpack, this little tool for hygiene signals mobility and uncertainty. One might even wonder whether the term "everyday item" is truly fitting, given that the objects found here are carried, used, and ultimately discarded by people who are far removed from the routines of a settled life.

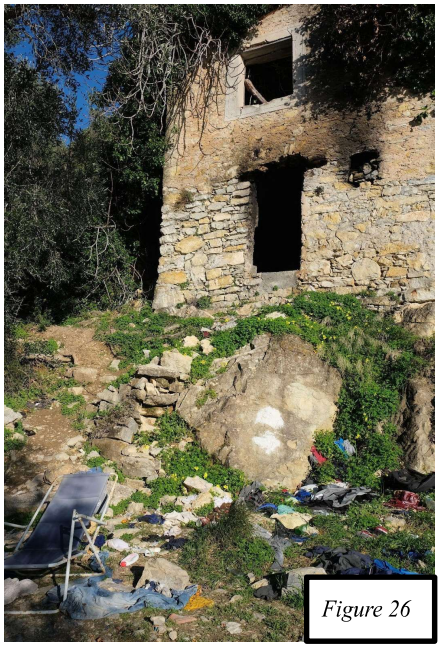


Figure 26

> "*I was confused by the amount of clothing because I feel like that would be a valuable resource to people on the move, but there is a lot of clothing strewn about the whole place or throughout the walk, especially in the beginning. [...] You really see parts of people's life on that trail everywhere. You look into their lives. It's a confusing door that you open because you see their clothes and you wonder 'why did you leave that behind there?*'" (Interview with Camilo)

Here may lie a core of the strong affectiveness of the environment. The strong association of objects with the people who leave them behind suggests the actions and, by extension, the agency of their former bearers. According to Sara Ahmed we hereby witness how "[...] *the*

accumulation of affective value shapes the surfaces of bodies and worlds.“ (Ahmed. 2004: 121)

Often, it is precisely everyday objects—those that are familiar and known to the observer—that can provoke powerful emotions. The familiar, which typically ekes out a "shadow existence," when removed from its context, can evoke a sense of intense alienation (Kimmich. 2013: 126). Clothing, for instance, reflects the individuality of its wearer. It represents different tastes, was made for adults or children, and of course, is gendered. As observers, we recognize these objects and connect them with human identities. Drawing on Bonnin, who stated that *“There are two main strategies for underground border crossings: camouflage and invisibility”* (Bonnin. 2021: 83), one could argue that here, people shed their visibility. Both strategies essentially aim at a similar goal: camouflage may involve making the identity of the person on the move invisible. The act of shedding visibility seems also to be a question of agency. While the informal camps in Ventimiglia are periodically cleared by the police, with tents and other personal belongings violently transformed into waste, at the Passo della Morte people on the move themselves carry out this act. Agency, which in any case is to be searched inside the interaction nonetheless appears to be located far more towards the latter. Adding to this discussion about symmetry among actors, Bonnin writes: “*Last but not least, we should emphasise that the socially relevant non-human agency of the infrastructure environment reveals itself only in synergy with the activities of human beings*.” (Ibid.: 89)

Ultimately, we can extract the idea that a particular interaction does not require its components to be of equal value regarding the influence they exert, as Bonnin carries on by complementing that “*Agency is not a property belonging to someone or something, but a process codetermined by both humans and non-humans*.” (Ibid.) Thus, agency must be searched in between the actants rather than inside of them. However, Bonnin’s statement does pose the question whether agency can also emerge between but non-human objects, meaning



Figure 27: Traces of an overnight stay in an abandoned ruin

in the total absence of humans. Rejecting any asymmetry in the involvement of actors within the network, Latour would probably affirm the possibility of agency consisting but of non-human entities. Addressing the question to the spider which has been accompanying us throughout chapter five, it would proclaim:

> *"It is simply to recognise that for things to interact they must be immersed in a kind of force field set up by the currents of the media that surround them. Cut out from these currents – that is, reduced to objects – they would be dead."* (Ingold. 2011: 93)

By that, the spider argues that when perceiving the Passo della Morte as a meshwork rather than a network, we require actors who fill the void with notions of feeling. This implies the ability to attribute value, to read symbols and to sense affect. Davidson, who we turned to when commencing our inquiry into the field of action, would likewise contradict the idea that agency can occur in absence of human actants. Yet, he would have employed different arguments, as for him agency requires conscious acting (cf.: Davidson. 2001 [1971]: 50). Saba Mahmood in turn elaborated how complex the emergence of agency can be and how contradicting the intentions and the actions of individuals can appear and yet produce autonomy (cf.: Mahmood. 2011 [2005]). When regarding the findings along the Passo della Morte, we must bear in mind that intentional acting signifies more than just doing something specifically for a particular reason.

As described in the preceding discourse on the value of objects, the relationship between objects and people can reveal much about a specific situation. Everyday objects, such as clothing, are typically perceived by most human societies as commodities. At the same time, it must be recognized that the status of an object as a commodity depicts only one phase in its biography. Objects can move in and out of said phase (Appadurai. 1986: 17). Moreover, such objects, particularly in their existence as commodities, are subject to the political discourses of their environment and the rules of economic value production. This fact makes the moment particularly interesting when these objects exit or re-enter the phase of being a commodity. When people crossing the Passo della Morte transform their clothing from a commodity into waste, we witness a shift in the notions of worth, which stem from a complex variety of regulations of value production, which go far beyond individual decisions. A violation of such regulations may thus appear as a political act. As such, it is always conditioned by external influences, and for people facing significant challenges, these influences can be quite strong. As Latour argues, in analyzing the processes in which clothing and the people who wear it are involved, we must focus on the interaction of the entire network (or *meshwork*, as Ingold

would add). But where does the individual decision of the actors come into play in this process?

For instance, in 2021, I met a man named Derick, who had just returned from being detained and pushed back. Derrick was wearing a stylish blue tracksuit, which he told me he had brought from his little fashion business he was running back in Cameroon. Since he was being apprehended by border authorities almost daily, then immediately sent back to Italy and subsequently forced to walk past the border spot on foot, we ended up seeing each other almost every day for a week. At some point, I began to wonder if it might make sense to change his outfit. On the one hand, the blue tracksuit seemed quite conspicuous to me; on the other hand, sportswear might indicate to the police that the individual whose ID they check on the train is not a commuter or tourist, but rather someone who had traveled thousands of kilometers. When I finally mustered the nerve to bring this up, Derrick insisted that the tracksuit was from the store to which he felt affiliated and that on top of this, his appearance was very important to him. He had crossed many borders wearing that blue tracksuit and had no intention of giving it up now.

Nonetheless, in the end I received a text message from him, sending his regards from Paris.

Derick had therefore decided, despite external influences, which likely would have made crossing the border easier without the suit, to keep it and still managed to reach his destination. This opens a range of questions concerning agency and simultaneously points to the ambiguity that Salter identifies as constitutive of infrastructural systems (cf.: Salter. 2013: 10). Furthermore, Derick's seemingly counterintuitive act appears to slightly challenge the symmetrical treatment of all involved actants and actors that Latour demands. The question of agency, then, must be explored in greater depth. For now, however, we can conclude that the transformation—or the prevention of transformation—of commodities requires careful reflection on both the individual agency of actors and the specific situations in which they find themselves.

> "*Thus, even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context*." (Appadurai. 1986: 5)

Outdoor clothing and hiking equipment can be of immense use during the traversal of the pass and throughout the long journey leading to it, yet on the other side of the mountain, in the clean, orderly streets of Menton, they may suddenly become a significant liability. Thus, the

act of leaving these objects behind also tells us much about the experience of flight (cf. Bischoff, 2018: 78). Moreover, these objects continue to affect those around them, even when they are no longer worn on the bodies of those who once carried them.

6.2.1. Coding and Symbolism of the Ordinary

Through their undeniable presence, these objects shape the place itself while simultaneously serving as markers along the way. Abandoned clothes, for instance, signal to those passing by that they are still on the correct path. Following the trail of shirts, toothbrushes, and hygiene items offers a sense of orientation; almost akin to the painted waymarks found along hiking trails in the Austrian Alps. The danger of losing one's way here is, in fact, real. From Grimaldi, one descends and passes beneath the motorway bridge of Ponte San Ludovico, where in recent years, several people have lost their lives attempting to cross the bridge itself, rather than passing underneath it (Barnabà. 2024: 67). At the massive columns of this structure, one must resist the temptation to drift off course along the slope to the left, and instead check the offline map and turn right, heading uphill once more. Soon, underwear and suitcases reappear at the sides of the trail: one walks again in the traces of those who came before.

Crossing the small St. Luigi river—which until the Second World War marked the border between the two nation-states (Rinauro. 2021: 43)—one continues along an old metal bridge and begins ascending the western side of the slope. Passing the ruins of unfinished buildings, one finds items such as jackets and sanitary pads, and then reaches a rope that has been tied to a tree to assist along a particularly steep section of the path. Beyond this part, quite suddenly, one reaches the border itself: a metal fence extending to the cliffs on the left and tracing the ridge upward on the right. Immediately before this structure, once again: shirts, shoes, and blister packs of medication. On the fence, colorful cloth scraps and shirts have been knotted into the wire mesh, forming a curtain-like composition of textile fragments. And in the middle of this tapestry: a large hole is cut directly into the fence. Just beyond it, now on French territory, stands a stone marked with the word "Welcome".

One might think that the journey is now complete, that the path was not so difficult to walk; at least in daylight. But it is only on the other side of the fence that the truly steep cliffs begin. Between them, a narrow path leads down to the winding road that snakes through the outskirts of Menton. During several of my walks, a police jeep was stationed along this road. If one follows the road—and the clothes, which appear here too, though in smaller numbers—one eventually reaches the city. With a stroke of bad luck, one may be mistaken by police at one of the three train stations or the expansive public squares as someone who has just completed a long journey, be stopped, and shortly thereafter find themselves back in Ventimiglia. What many do not seem to realize is that the complications often only begin on the other side of the border. Activists continuously attempt to inform people on the move about the so-called 20km-zone surrounding the region. In fact, warnings about this reality are already present at the Passo della Morte itself. In 2025, hanging from the border fence, amidst the shirts and cloth pieces that—at least in 2021 and 2023—formed a curtain around the opening in the fence, I found a roughly 50-cm tall puppet suspended with a noose around its neck. It had human hair and was clothed in African wax print fabric. Its hands were posed in a distinctly Christ-like manner: the left hand resting on the chest, the right raised in a blessing gesture, pointing toward the hole in the fence and across into France. The gesture might be read as welcoming; if not for the noose around its neck, which left the puppet dangling from a rusted metal post on the fence. Like the seemingly discarded documents, the items of clothing and hygiene products left behind along the Passo della Morte are not simply waste. They are everyday objects situated within an extraordinary context. Their transformation from commodity to roadside debris speaks to the agency of individuals and the dynamics at play at the border. The familiar and mundane nature of these objects allows observers to easily form associations and emotional connections. Clothing, which closely resembles what we ourselves wear, is not abstract; thus the cognitive leap to imagine the people who wore these items is a short one. The puppet tied to the border fence illustrates this with particular poignancy. Its association as a threat works precisely through the clothing it wears: garments that have been transformed here into a political symbol.

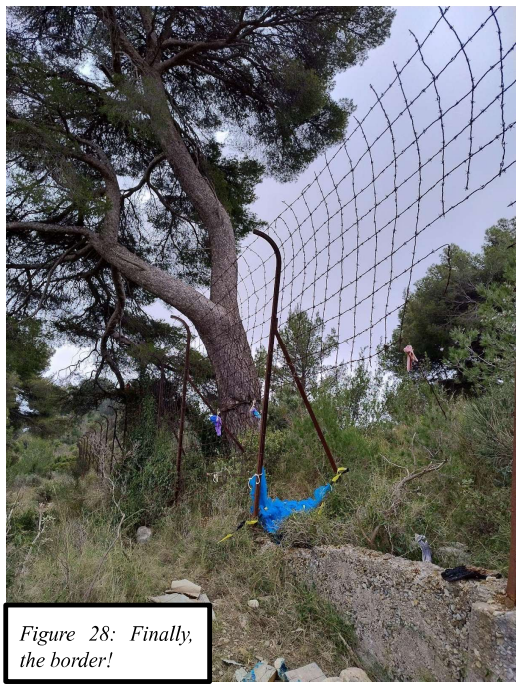


Figure 28: Finally, the border!

For many people, the act of removing their clothes and leaving behind personal items is driven by the desire not to be recognized as migrants, but to blend into the urban landscape of Menton among tourists and commuters. In shedding their clothes, they also shed their visibility as people on the move, effectively transforming themselves into individuals who are legible—accepted—within the confines of French national territory. The remnants that hikers encounter on the path are not merely lifeless objects; they are the discarded identities of migrants. This may help explain the undefinable unease experienced by some observers and the affective charge that surrounds the Passo della Morte (cf.: Kimmich. 2013: 126). It is the rupture with the familiar that produces a sense of disquiet. In the context of modern statehood, invisibility is often a status imposed externally; so that, as Proglio writes, "[...] *many individuals remain external to the history-making process; through an act of forclusion, they are rendered invisible individually or as part of a group or category of national belonging (Moroccan, Tunisian, Afghan, etc.) or citizenship (illegal, refugee, asylum seeker, etc.)*" (Proglio. 2021: 22). However, if we consider invisibility as a process that can be acted upon by marginalized individuals themselves, it implies agency and thus the capacity for action since "[...] *most underground border crossings take place when migrants manage to become invisible to the sight of border control*." (Bonnin. 2021: 84)

But what, then, can be said about individual agency? Let us return to the example of D., who—despite the apparent difficulties this decision may have caused him—chose to keep wearing his blue tracksuit, and with it, his visibility. At first glance, it may seem reasonable to assert that there exists an unwavering agency of the individual, one that retains its autonomy even under difficult conditions. However, the authors De Genova, Garelli, and Tazzioli—who have closely examined the scope of action available to people on the move in the Ventimiglia region—challenge this notion. According to them, the autonomy of these individuals must not



Figure 29

be understood as "[...] *abstract, essentialized, or absolute autonomy but one that is necessarily limited, compromised, contradictory, and tactical*." (De Genova, Garelli, and Tazzioli. 2018:143)

This means that we must understand the interaction between clothing and the people who leave it behind within a broader context. On the one hand, there are—following Latour—the networks at play within the system of the Passo della Morte, in which clothing, people on the move, the path's geography, weather conditions, imagined (or real, lurking) police officers, and many other elements mutually influence one another, ultimately producing actions; such as the decision to shed clothing for tactical, practical, or even ideological reasons. As Latour notes in his analysis of the concept of system, such systems can indeed frame or localize actions temporarily, but at the same time, the local and the global, for him, cannot be ultimately disentangled. Migration, and the politics that seek to prevent it, must of course be considered within a global frame, even if many of the concrete interactions take place in highly localized settings. This also holds true for the biographies of both people and objects. Derick's reflections on whether to replace his bright blue tracksuit with a more inconspicuous outfit are shaped by more than just the immediate situation at the border; they are equally embedded in the individual histories—his own and that of the tracksuit—and in the relationship that arises between them as a result.

And this relationship, as well as the actors involved—Ingold would add—are not static, but continuously shaped and transformed through ongoing interactions. It is also worth noting that people, in contradiction to the interests of some actors within the border regime and arguably sometimes even in defiance to the logic of capitalist value production, transform commodities into waste. The influence that people exert on the negotiations occurring along the path appears—despite Latour's call for symmetry—significantly greater than that of many



Figure 30

other actors. When informal camps in Ventimiglia are periodically dismantled by police and bulldozers, and the belongings of their residents—such as tents and personal effects—are turned into trash, this interaction clearly does little to empower people on the move, even though they are themselves participants in the process. Instead, what emerges is a highly asymmetrical power relation between state authorities and the camp's inhabitants. On the Passo della Morte, by contrast, the transformation of property into waste facilitates the crossing of the border; and here, agency within the web of interaction can be located far more clearly on the side of people on the move.

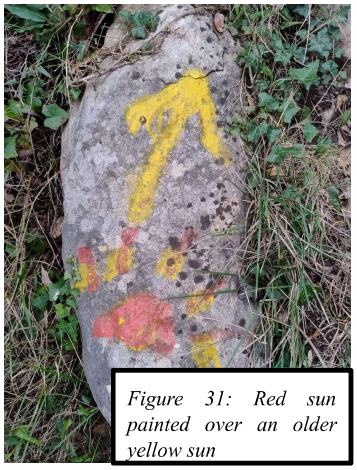


Figure 31: Red sun painted over an older yellow sun

6.3. Maps, Messages and Signs

At first glance, these everyday objects appear to have been discarded along the path without any discernible structure. While a certain system can indeed be identified—they suggest where people have walked or taken rest—the trail is unlikely to have been deliberately or cognitively planned, particularly considering that both people on the move and passeurs presumably prefer to remain invisible on the Passo (cf.: Bonnin. 2021: 82). Yet, alongside these inadvertent traces, the hiker also encounters others: marks that appear to have been placed intentionally. On my most recent visit, I recorded approximately 80 markings painted along the path. These were in red, orange, green, yellow, black, and blue, and appeared on stones, walls, trees, boxes, and even on plants. Often, they consist of simple arrows pointing in a specific direction. Added to this are dots of color and brief notations offering orientation; such as "France" or "No." One particularly prominent symbol is a simplified rendering of the sun, which may explain the name *Cammino del Sole*, as an activist once called it. This symbol appears frequently along the path and also seems to function as a form of navigation. The markings vary in age: some are heavily faded, others appear freshly repainted, sometimes in different colors. Some markings have been crossed out or overwritten with arrows pointing in directions that contradict the original signage. Especially along the first half of the path, the slopes are not particularly steep, and the primary danger appears to be getting lost. From around the midpoint onward, however, the *Passo* begins to demand climbing, and hikers encounter more rugged, rocky terrain. The meaning of the symbols thus shifts: no longer are they solely intended to prevent disorientation, but they begin to serve as warnings of physical

danger. One example is a marking on a rock, written in Arabic, that points to the European emergency number 112.



Figure 32

On the western side of the St. Luigi stream, the path grows steeper and eventually leads to a rocky ridge beyond the fence. The cliffs there drop off suddenly, and especially at night, an unwary climber could easily fall. The path itself is not always intuitive, and on each of my visits, I lost my way at least once. This makes it all the more vital to orient oneself by means of the various forms of infrastructure and coding. One option, therefore, is to follow the painted symbols. However, it quickly becomes apparent that these are not coherent. Arrows frequently point in conflicting directions: some quite clearly lead away from the path and into thorny undergrowth, others seem to guide one directly toward cliffs or drop-offs. During my recent hikes, I chose to follow markings of a particular color, only to find—much to my surprise—that they no longer pointed in the correct direction once I reached the ridge. I continued to follow them and ultimately ended up in a dense thicket. Remembering how I had walked the path on a previous occasion, I chose to retrace that earlier route, even though it meant ignoring several symbols marked with "no" and ominous slanted crosses. Nonetheless, this led me back to the path that runs along the cliffside toward Menton. In 2023, a long-time activist in the region, Yuri, told me that the Passo della Morte is also known to far-right activists such as those affiliated with *Génération Identitaire*. According to Yuri, they occasionally visit the trail to pose for symbolically charged photographs and leave behind false markers or even bear traps. When I spoke in 2025 with a passeur named Otello about the misleading symbols, he angrily blamed the "*bastardi nazisti*." The activist Remon likewise explained to me:



Figure 33

> "*There are also a lot of racist like fascist people that also put up signs to confuse people and those signs actually lead to like cliffs where you can easily fall off.*" (Interview with Remon)

In fact, the Identitarian movement's website was taken offline in 2021, which makes it difficult to find direct evidence from the group itself. At the same time, laying bear traps for humans (as the activist claimed) would be so criminally severe that it seems highly unlikely such acts would be publicly documented. What is publicly known, however, is that *Génération Identitaire* held a demonstration in Ventimiglia in 2015 (Le Journal de Dimanche. 2015), and carried out a symbolic action in 2018 in the mountains near Briançon, north of the *Passo della Morte*, with the aim of obstructing the movement of migrants across the border (Pascual, et. al. 2018; Nordstrom. 2018; Verfassungsschutz Baden-Würtemberg. 2021). When I asked Otello, who seemed eager to stress that although he was a passeur, he was also a "good person", who was responsible for the markings indicating the correct or safe path, he told me: "*Des gens comme moi!*" (memory transcript from a conversation with Otello). By "people like me," he seemed to mean pro-migrant activists; an identity he claimed for himself. Perhaps in an effort to substantiate his involvement, he went on to explain that the composition of the paint used for the symbols consisted of a mixture of castor oil and fluorescent pigment, to ensure that the markings would withstand the elements and be visible at night.

Whoever may be responsible for which markings, it is clear that multiple agendas are at play. The markings sometimes coexist, while in other instances it appears that someone has attempted to erase or overwrite them with different symbols. A strong sense of *processuality* emerges here: the various colors, meanings, and degrees of weathering suggest that the path has been infrastructurally altered over time by a range of actors. These actors also seem to pursue their goals in varying ways. The doll hanging from the border fence conveys a message diametrically opposed to the word *Welcome*, painted just beside it on a stone wall. All of these border symbols have in common that they convey coded messages. These messages come from anonymized activists—with diverse motivations—and are directed toward anonymized walkers of the path. For this reason, the symbols must be simple yet clear and visible. Since people traversing the Passo have little opportunity to research who is behind the markings and what their intentions may be, they are often left with no option but to trust. One strategy is to select symbols of a particular color and follow only those; but even



Figure 34: Confusing messages

that can lead one astray, as I experienced myself. In that sense, the construction of trust followed by misdirection begins to resemble a particularly insidious tactic. When I asked an activist how best to prepare for a safe crossing of the Passo della Morte, he explained:

> "*I think what you need is a community, actually. You need people that are familiar with the path to kind of show you even where the entrance is*." (Interview with Camilo)

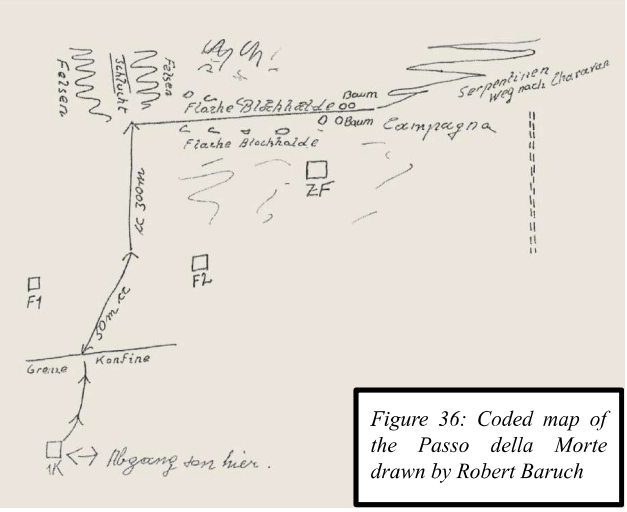


Figure 36: Coded map of the Passo della Morte drawn by Robert Baruch

People in migration are part of large informal formations that can span vast numbers of individuals; many of whom will never meet in person. These knowledge communities appear to be integral to broader migratory movements and have a significant influence on the evolving situation and, by extension, the geography of the border (cf.: Bonnin. 2021: 81f). The case of Ventimiglia clearly demonstrates how this infrastructure also takes physical form. When Robert Baruch successfully crossed the border in 1939, he sent a hand-drawn coded map to the Jewish community in Merano (Veziano. 2016: 223). In 2025, I received a very similar handmade map from a passeur, which described the same location; albeit recommending a crossing point several dozen meters further south. More modern forms of mapping also circulate within these communities. In 2023, an activist gave me an offline map designed to be used with a special hiking-app on a smartphone. This map, marked with custom indicators to denote the path, has the advantage of being anonymized and usable without internet or mobile signal. The activist who provided it claimed that mobile phone signals made it easier for French police to locate migrants along the path; hence, he strongly recommended offline usage. When I asked the passeur/activist Otello how he would prepare people on the move for a crossing of the Passo della Morte, he showed me a series of photographs of himself walking the path. Reenacting a smuggler-client scenario, he insisted that I memorize every

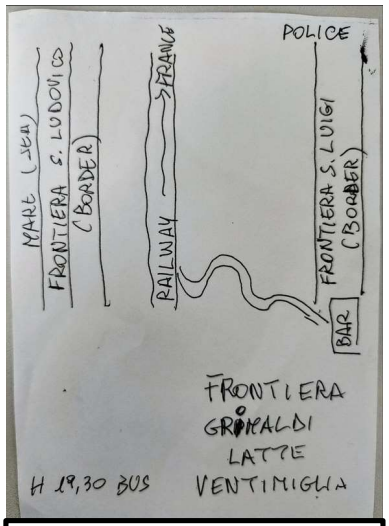


Figure 35: Coded map of a possible crossing point south of the Passo. Handed out by a passeur

photo and the trail junctions visible within them. He even demonstrated a 270-degree turn I was supposed to perform upon reaching a specific point, so I would then continue in the correct direction; a form of mapping that relies on cognitive and embodied memory. Following Harley's perception of appropriating space through cartography, these types of maps constitute clearly political action. Not only do they portray the space in self-chosen terms, they also achieve to make unknown and therefore possibly hostile space accessible for those able to obtain this infrastructure.

> *While the map is never the reality, in such ways it helps to create a different reality."* (Harley. 2011 (1987): 62)

Harley originally refers to nation states' imperialist attempts to define global power dynamics through shaping the world in their own preferred terms. However, when we understand that appropriation can occur both by defining space as well as making it accessible, I argue that the creation and utilization of these maps constitute political struggle in terms of ownership over the Passo della morte. While the idea that knowledge and the production of knowledge are complex political power discourses is certainly not new to anthropology, at the border, this discourse is focused particularly on the production and distribution of geographical and logistical knowledge.

> *"Human and non-human assemblages are political workings in progress. Another way to put this is to suggest that sovereignty is worked on through a network of people engaged with, and engaged on, through materialities (e.g., tools of cartographic measurement, instruments for aerial military Photograph, calculation devices for geographical maps, documents of title deed, the office building of a Maps Department, methodologies for assigning value to distinct properties)"* (Navaro-Yashin. 2012: 43)

Moreover, my research also showed that many people rely on the guidance of passeurs in order to find the Passo della Morte in the first place and, ultimately, to cross it. Yet here too, a certain kind of knowledge is presupposed: knowledge required to get in contact with them, to negotiate an "appropriate" price, and finally to assess whether this person can be trusted.

6.3.1. Malinformation and Knowledge

What these selected forms of informal infrastructure have in common is that they are not publicly accessible. They are circulated within networks, and interpersonal contact is required to gain access to the aforementioned resources, let alone to even learn about the existence of the path and to find its starting point.

It is no coincidence that one of the main tasks of migrant-supporting actors has been the dissemination of knowledge. This is also why *Upupa* (formerly *Eufemia*)—a kind of day center and information point—was opened. The information distributed there aimed to inform people about the various services and initiatives established by committed activists and local residents, some of which were described in Chapter 2.2.1. When I asked Camilo, who had previously explained that "*community*" was essential for preparing oneself for the *Passo*, about the most important equipment for successfully crossing the trail, he responded as follows:

> *"Water and information, I think, are the two most important things. But actually [...] I think information is the most important."* (Interview with Camilo)

This can be effectively translated into the satisfaction of basic survival needs, as well as access to informal infrastructure and knowledge. The fact that the infrastructure for basic services is informally expanded and utilized by the people on the move to achieve individual goals has remained unchanged over the years. A striking example of this is the Red Cross camp: Despite the regulatory function of this institution, networks and information exchange were facilitated among the camp's residents. They also used it to prepare for further attempts at crossing the border (Aru. 2021a: 1631). With the closure of the camp in August 2020 (Ibid.: 1634), the provision of basic services in Ventimiglia has been almost entirely taken over by committed activists (and of course by the migrants themselves). Even in the places where basic services like food and information are provided by activist groups, where I moved in 2021 and 2023, it was evident that these services were being used by the people to pursue their own goals. Many individuals also used these places to connect with Passeurs, although the activists' offerings at these info points were primarily designed to ease people's stay in Ventimiglia. At the same time, there was a desire to create an alternative to the official aid offerings, such as the aforementioned camp.

The focus here was on autonomy and participation from the visitors, and it became apparent that some people who began using these spaces developed a sense of responsibility for them.

A particularly notable incident occurred at the Border Spot in winter 2021, when a dispute broke out between several people on the move. One man was accused of ingratitude towards the activists because he did not wash his dishes after eating. Of course, activists hold a fairly strong position at these locations simply because they manage the physical infrastructure, such as the key to unlock the Upupa info point or gas canisters to make coffee. However, in practice, the development of these places in terms of both design and use emerges from the interaction of all the actors involved. This form of adaptation or appropriation can also be applied to the Passo della Morte, which, like other crossing paths, originally began as a hiking trail and has undergone significant changes in appearance and function through the communal use of various actors (and the unintentional exclusion of certain others, such as tourists). For the maintenance of the path itself, no official body from the administration of Ventimiglia feels responsible, as two residents of the village of Grimaldi told me. Instead, it is the local community that, self-organized, cleans the path once a year of discarded objects." [14].

The Passo della Morte plays a special role in terms of autonomy: The knowledge of the existence of this place offers the possibility for autonomous border crossing, far from dependence on other actors. When I asked the activist Toni about his motivation for scouting hiking trails, he told me:

> *"My Motivation regarding walkable routes was... because on one hand they're for free and on the other hand it was about giving people another option [...] apart from buying oneself into some mafia-related Groups with money just to get ripped off in the worst case; something that happened so frequently."* (Interview with Toni)

What Toni points out here hints at a situation of uncertainty in which people on the move find themselves in Ventimiglia: seemingly reliable informants can turn out to be frauds, a problem that informational systems within the community cannot always solve. Additionally, maintaining faith in the correctness of the procedures around the European legal systems can quickly lead to disappointment: the legal mechanisms that legitimize the act of pushbacks are difficult to understand or, in some cases, entirely absent, as I tried to illustrate in Chapter 3.1. The markings along the Passo della Morte can have a similar effect. Some can clearly be trusted, while others cannot. And even markings that proved helpful on the first half of the trail may point in dangerous directions on the mountain ridge. There is thus a system of uncertainty, which reaches a sad climax at this location when a seemingly reliable signpost

[14]The occasional maintenance of the Passo della Morte by residents on both sides of the border taking place about one or two times per year is also to be understood as a fraternization peace ceremony after World War II (Barnabà. 2018: 30).

unexpectedly points towards the abyss. Knowledge is a very valuable resource at the border, and the distribution of knowledge thus takes on a similar significance from an activist perspective as food and clothing. The criminalization of knowledge dissemination on the other side also seems logical when mobility for migrants is to be restricted. The activist Toni explained to me that he sees one of his key tasks at the border as: "[...] *studying a lot of maps, studying public transportation timetables, checking out paths, marking difficult sections so that the transfer of knowledge is as simple as possible.*" (Interview with Toni) The lack of support from state actors in Ventimiglia increases the importance of informal infrastructure. Unlike in official institutions, with clear regulations, the crucial capital here is knowledge; where to find this infrastructure, how to use it, and whether it can be trusted. The same applies to the assertion of individual rights against authorities, as they often act arbitrarily and unlawfully from the perspective of people on the move, making the official legal process even more difficult.



Figure 37: Descending to Menton

Likewise, crossing the border, which since the abolition of the Schengen agreement can only occur "irregularly" and clandestinely, requires reliance on informal systems and techniques. Lastly, the Passo della Morte is also not maintained by institutional actors, which could possibly ensure a safe crossing through installation of signs and general upkeep. The criminalization of knowledge about safe escape routes, which may fall under the crime of human trafficking, as activists and passeurs repeatedly explained to me, in turn hinders the dissemination of information.

The discourse on knowledge and infrastructure must thus always be careful not to overstep the legal boundaries, or to operate exclusively in an informal, secretive, and coded framework; especially when the structure and regulations of the border regime are rejected:

> *"The work that NGOs do is crucial in these regions* ['European Border Regions'—note by the author], *but they also have to comply with legal framework conditions, meaning a certain collaboration is inevitable. And it has always been important to me—especially in this context—to act autonomously."* (Interview with Toni)

This decentralization of knowledge capital integrates a multitude of actors within a global framework into this discourse, potentially leading to democratization. At the same time, clarity suffers. Actors dispute each other's competence regarding information, and tactics must be developed to prove one's trustworthiness. At the Passo della Morte, one can observe how opposition is raised through the painting over and removal of other markings, and how supposed truths about the route are replaced with other truths. It is an interaction continuously conducted among various actors. It should be emphasized that this involves not only the "painting" agents, such as passeurs, anti-migration actors, and open-border activists, but also those who find the symbols and attempt to interpret them, and not least the objects and the geography of the Passo itself. A discourse requires an interplay of senders and recipients, and of course, a medium. Here, the stones, trees, and walls bearing the symbols play a dual role, as tools that translate the social interaction and as infrastructure upon which, as a material basis, the social world pours out its "signs and representations" (Latour. 2001: 244). This also implies that this discourse extends far beyond the Passo della Morte, as the symbols and their necessity must be understood in the context of the global crisis. Their meaning should be international and comprehensible.



Figure 38

Latour and Ingold would additionally argue together that the objects adorned with symbols are more than just canvases, but actively intervene in the interaction: paint weathers, stones can roll away, branches break off, stone walls collapse; meanings change. A stone painted with an arrow can suddenly point in a different direction if it turns. An Arabic inscription on a wall can call for the opening of the border, while a wrongly placed arrow communicates, without using a single letter, the opposite. And both can even happen simultaneously: markings of one color may initially point the right way but later along the path suddenly direct towards the abyss, thus “lying.” The readers of the signs bring their own interpretations with them, and their trust or mistrust is based on a long process of knowledge acquisition and evaluation. Here, we find Ingold's advocated fluidity of actors: Nothing appears fixed but rather in constant flow of influence and negotiation.

The puppet, which was placed at the summit of the path as a supposed warning, is made of a variety of materials. The Jesus-like gesture and the clothing in African patterns may have a

friendly effect on human actors, and perhaps it did at certain points in its biography. Hung on a fence with a noose around its neck, however, the effect suddenly reverses, and it may have a stronger emotional impact than another gesture or piece of clothing could have had. Assuming the symbols were placed with a conscious agenda, they are meant to enable a safe crossing, but their contradictions make this impossible, and the effect may be a feeling of additional insecurity. It is difficult to say with certainty which actors—and with what intention—are responsible for the signs. Interestingly, they differ from everyday objects we find. The clothes, toothbrushes, and suitcases are of great archaeological relevance from a social science perspective on political geography. But they were probably not left behind with the intent of conveying a message. The act of leaving them behind is, of course, highly political. But it is unlikely to aim at actively shaping the space. Instead, the objects lie where people have passed through, and they are absent in places where no one has been. As a result, they can serve as "honest" markers of the way, more so than an arrow painted on the wall next to the word "Welcome." Thus, objects that at first glance may seem like trash become part of the infrastructure of the Passo della Morte and, by chance, function as actors in the process of border crossing.

7. The Passo della Morte as a Site of Negotiation

The current zeitgeist does not steer onto a world with less borders and more mobility. With the government of Austria stopping legal ways to acquire family reunion for holders of positive asylum statuses, Germany reintroducing systematic controls along its borders, threatening to restrain any attempt for asylum application and Italy trying to find a legal way to illegally deport refugees to Albania outside of EU borders (just to name a few examples), Europe becomes increasingly externally and internally walled off. But the outcome will not just to be observed in an increase of state violence but also an ever-growing amount of inconsistency regarding the transparency of these *assemblages*, as Foucault would probably call them (cf.: Foucault. 2007 (1978): 311ff), built upon legality as well as illegality. It seems likely that this lack of clear structure rooted in comprehensible law coming off transparent and fair processes conducted at eye level will result in actors of all sites having to negotiate individually, and border environments such as the one described in this work will multiply. Inquiring into the reality of these places consisting of mobility and stasis alike can therefore prove fruitful not only from an anthropological perspective but also from a humanitarian point

of view[15]. The scope of research engaging with migration should naturally not be limited to those who managed to geographically "arrive" in a country or to those banning or welcoming them. The process of shaping and influencing does not only happen in both ways—which is certainly not a new finding—but takes place already during the phase of physical travel. The border areas do not only provide insight into the stories of the struggle of those on both sides of the fence, furthermore these environments of discourse do narrate the creation of themselves and offer a new point of view on agency negotiation among various and barely tangible actors.

But why, ultimately, should we focus particularly on the Passo della Morte?
The reason lies in the fact that this path serves as a paradigmatic site of the broader crisis unfolding in Ventimiglia and, by extension, on a global scale. It is here that all involved actor groups converge and negotiate the operational logic of the border regime. Processes emblematic of the EU's bordering practices culminate in this site, where we encounter—in a concrete and spatially delimited frame—all elements that constitute the current crisis.

On the one hand, the border becomes physically tangible: in the form of a materially manifested and historically contested border fence, as well as in the region's geography. These are real obstacles—sheer cliffs, rock faces, and precipices—that must be physically overcome by human bodies in order to cross. The hundreds of torn documents scattered along the path—rendered illegible and stripped of administrative meaning—materialize the bureaucratic machinery of the state and the migratory practices that respond to it. This constant proliferation of paper, periodically cleared by weather or by local residents of Grimaldi, reproduces itself relentlessly and tells a story about both the border's abstract bureaucracy as much as the very practical ways in which people engage with it. Discourses of deprivation and economic precarity—discourses that circulate in Ventimiglia as they do in most militarized border zones—are translated here into piles of discarded clothing and everyday objects. These items offer glimpses into the biographies of those who carried them, allowing one to trace the moment of relinquishment. We observe how ownership and value can be revoked in an instant, and how possessions become burdens. Yet the processes by which commodities are transformed into waste—or into archaeological traces—are far from straightforward. This transformation often corresponds with the rendering of migrant bodies

[15] In their appeal for an "Encounter Perspective" in migration research Leonardo Schiocchet, Sabine Bauer-Amin, Maria Six-Hohenbalken and Andre Gingrich argue for an approach which emphasizes more on the conflicting dichotomies migrants often find themselves in and what conflicts and strategies might emerge to tackle this issue. (cf.: Schiocchet, et. al. 2020: 100)

themselves as invisible to the border regime. Indeed, the border does not only produce poverty and loss but also generates a rich material culture: from the traces found at the Passo della Morte, to hand-drawn maps by passeurs, activist flyers, and books circulating among local residents. These are not merely decorative ephemera; through their discursive agency, they manifest the border.

And just as other border regions are saturated with competing political discourses, so too is Ventimiglia; and nowhere more intensively than at the Passo della Morte. It is here that the various participants in the discursive field meet in embodied form, staking their claims symbolically and communicatively: through graffiti, directional arrows, coded messages, and color markings. As in a shared chatroom of anonymized political agents, proponents and opponents of the border—as well as those in the ambiguous middle—broadcast messages that are often disconnected from one another and yet remain entangled in an ongoing discursive interaction. Their authors are often unidentifiable, making it difficult to distinguish between misinformation, performative "trolling," and genuine assistance.

But the Passo della Morte offers more than a condensed representation of the crisis, it also generates and presents forms of solution. Most immediately, for those stranded in Ventimiglia and trapped in a cycle of precarity beneath overpasses and in daily confrontations with state violence, the path offers a possibility of autonomous border crossing: a means of circumventing bureaucratic and financial obstacles through sheer physical effort. For many, this possibility offers a form of liberation from the abstract machinery of permits and queues, however fleeting it may be. Yet even for those not seeking to cross, the site represents a form of relief. For critics of border closures, each successful crossing marks a symbolic victory. For passeurs and other entrepreneurial actors, the path provides an opportunity for economic survival. Paradoxically, for Ventimiglia's local administration and its residents, the Passo della Morte offers a form of pressure release: alleviating the presence of large numbers of traumatized people in the city's public spaces and reducing the visibility of smuggling operations. As the activist Remon once remarked:

> "*I think these paths help kind of release this pressure. It's an escape for some people and for Ventimiglia as well*." (Interview with Remon)

The state regulates the permeability of the border, yet it remains almost entirely absent when it comes to creating interpersonal systems connecting migrants, activists, and smugglers; and thus exercises little influence over their formation or governance. The result is a high degree

of economic and psychological precarity, but on the other hand it enables those informal networks—or *meshworks*—to flourish, in which agency can be negotiated beyond the reach of any singular monopoly on violence. Such processes of negotiation unfold not only among the region's various human agents but also in concert with the border's material culture: the objects on people's bodies or beneath their feet, the things that surround them, connect them, or keep them apart. These objects carry information, convey messages, and—crucially—either propel the events at the Passo della Morte forward or bear witness to those that have already taken place.

As the dialogue between Latour and Ingold suggests, agency only emerges through the interaction of actors. The actions of those who traverse the Passo della Morte must therefore be understood within the broader web of relational contexts, irrespective of whether such actions are conscious or unconscious. Yet alongside the production of agency, these interactions achieve something else: they construct the very system on which interaction can occur, thereby conditioning further entanglements. They form what Ingold calls *the environment.* This environment is thus continually brought into being and provides the ground for interaction while simultaneously engaging as participant. If we loosen ourselves from Latour's insistence on the symmetry of actants within an agency-producing network, we can see that interaction is not merely cooperation among equals but also a struggle for power among competitors; one whose outcome points toward issues of sovereignty. The question of whether all participants of these interactions act with conscious intent (or possess consciousness at all) is, once again, not necessarily decisive. Because even seemingly inanimate objects along the path can contain the ability to empower as well as to restrict the framework of action of other actors and therefore manipulate the outcome of agency.

> "*This practiced network between humans and instruments, then, is what makes sovereignty. Or, sovereignty is only actually realized through an enactment of agency (back and forth) between people and things in and on a given territory.*" (Navaro-Yasin. 2012: 43)

Ultimately, we must turn our attention to where and how agency can be restricted. For the very existence of agency implies the possibility of its absence, or at least its partial limitation. The same holds true for the sovereignty of those who act: Only through asymmetries of power can resistance emerge, and it is resistance itself that reveals the contours of such imbalances. When travel is prohibited to those who possess little institutional power, then the mere act of voyage challenges the structure of a system (cf.: Monsutti. 2022: 69). Michel Foucault, who

should not be missing in any master's thesis and is therefore granted this intervention at the final pages of this work, has put it as follows:

> *"These power relations are thus mobile, reversible, and unstable. It should also be noted that power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free. [...] Thus, in order for power relations to come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides. [...] This means that in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all."* (Foucault. 1997 [1988]: 292)

The distinctiveness of the power structures in the Ventimiglia region lies in their pronounced inconsistency and internal contradictions and in its actors' abilities to adapt and overcome. This applies both to those most affected by institutional violence—namely, people on the move, who are often unable to assert their rights vis-à-vis state authorities—and to those who enact this violence, such as the border police, whose official duties frequently conflict with existing legal frameworks. In the streets of Ventimiglia and along the narrow trail of the Passo della Morte, it is rarely clear who is a trafficker and who is a facilitator. Who pursues which interests, and who ultimately benefits (or suffers) from them? The boundaries between legality and illegality, solidarity and hostility, officialdom and informality remain consistently blurred. Even the border itself lacks clearly delineated contours: crossing the fence does not mark the end of danger, as the threat of pushbacks continues to loom. Hence, when the contours of this body of hegemonic power over people is this awkward to grasp, so are the forms such as the victims of this power. Saba Mahmood aimed to challenge such one-directional perceptions of agency and has therefore strongly "[...] *insisted that it is best not to propose a theory of agency but to analyze agency in terms of the different modalities it takes and the grammar of concepts in which its particular affect, meaning, and form resides*." (2011 (2005): 188) She together with other researchers who engaged with women choosing to dedicate themselves to religious systems of belief by studying and teaching the islamic rule, showed that agency and the freedom to assert it can likewise exist against cultural or political boundaries but also *inside* and even *through* these.[16] Agency on the Passo della Morte must

[16] Sylvia Frisk for instance describes how women's motivation to engage with islamic tradition in Malaysia goes beyond traditional ideals or cultural obligations. Rather, the author explores how studying values, which from a "Western" feminist point of view might appear quite conservative, can facilitate gaining prestige and boosting the students' position in social hierarchy. (cf.: Frisk. 2009: 182). Additionally, Frisk shows how obtaining the knowledge necessary to engage in religious practices can enable women to better participate in culturally prestigious discourses and therefore partake in shaping them (Ibid.: 185ff).

then be perceived as relationally performed and ultimately practiced not necessarily against the resistance of geographical obstacles and the violence of state authorities but rather *along* and through interplay *with* these factors.

Mark B. Salter (2013), along with our own field observations, has demonstrated that contradiction need not be an exception but can, in fact, be constitutive of the border regime itself. But how can such contradictions be recognized from the perspective of those subjected to them and how could they be navigated? Agency, as it emerges among the actors of the Passo della Morte, lies precisely in the effort to contend with the ambiguity of the regime in the Ventimiglia region. Navaro-Yashin employed the term *No Man's Land* to describe places which seem to exist outside of known notions of normality (2003: 108), which is definitely the case for marginalized people since the contradicting sets of law leave almost no space for people to exist. Rights which were perceived as universal furthermore seem not to apply to them. People and objects alike adapt and generate counter-systems to the systems of the border: when the legal apparatus fails to provide protection, new normative orders are developed; when suffering is rendered invisible, invisibility itself becomes a strategy. When the transmission of information is criminalized, anonymized codes and maps emerge. And when the train to France is inaccessible to migrants, they begin constructing their own infrastructures. Navaro-Yashin would complement:

> *"In 'no man's land', the meaning of existence must be sensed in the unkempt places, the evacuated buildings, [...] the loud silence, in order to be grasped."* (Navaro-Yashin. 2003: 121)

But how are these infrastructures to be grasped when we deal with agency as a product of mutual interaction of numerous actors? Engaging with Latour and Ingold was crucial when approaching this question. Naturally, the environment evolving in front us can be observed in a variety of ways. Yet the question remains how individual agency is displayed: Are the participants just parts of one big agency-containing organism found in between all of them? Or are all actors individual bearers of agency? Is it the forest who is shaping the trees or are the trees constituting the forest? And sometimes it is even hard to see the latter because of the sheer number of the former. Ingold, who definitely drew a lot of inspiration from Gille Deleuze and Felix Guattari discussing the idea of tree-like and rhizomatic systems, would strongly oppose any notion of networks which ultimately are part of a greater structure.

What we are dealing with here is not a structure resembling a tree in the Deleuzian and Guattarian sense, where the tangle of existential roots works toward the production of a unified, arborescent form (Deleuze, Guattari. 1987). Nor does the Passo della Morte present itself as a rhizome in which individual social manifestations are the outcome of a shared underground network; say, the crisis in Ventimiglia. If we are to understand the Passo, we require an image that captures mutual conditioning and explains the entangled interplay of forces. The forest consists of discrete components: autonomous trees with their respective root systems, as well as rhizomes, which may operate independently yet form interconnected, tree-like structures. That these influence one another is self-evident, for such interrelation is constitutive of a forest. The relationship is thus reciprocally multidimensional: no forest without (partially) autonomous organisms, no organisms without the forest. Everything is alive, in motion, in flux:

> *"It is a question of a model that is perpetually in construction or collapsing, and of a process that is perpetually prolonging itself, breaking off and starting up again." (*Deleuze, Guattari. 1987*: 35)*

Finally, the overall configuration becomes more tangible if we now add static elements like cliffs, gorges, concrete; components that do not inherently carry motion within themselves, but whose very immobility constrains the movement of organic elements and thus compels adaptation. The forest learns to climb along cliffs, to grow across gorges, and to crack open concrete with persistence. What emerges is the image of a mountain path that is constituted by both fixity and mobility; whose components are engaged in a process of constant adaptation and overcoming, and at times, collaboration. The picture, or rather: the pictures we can observe emerging from this discourse is not easy to classify. The term *formation* can imply that something is constantly *forming* which might serve as a useful description since it holds account to the fluidity of this field. If we decide to settle with the wording *assemblage*, which has repeatedly been employed by Jane Bennet, Mark B. Salter, Yael Navaro-Yashin, Brian Larkin and Michel Foucault throughout this work, we must remember Ingold issuing a warning to utilize this term carefully due to the stasis this wording possibly indicates (cf.: Ingold. 2015: 7). Nevertheless, I argue that it carries a number of benefits since the definition of an assemblage acknowledges the individual autonomy of its components; despite the interrelational influence they exert over each other. But if we devote ourselves to this particular term, we must do it in a way that recognizes the mobility and fluidity of the field. Thus, this implies more than rejecting the idea of its actants being stationary. Rather, the aim

is to understand that referring to only *one* environment created through its network would ignore the complexity of the Ventimiglia crisis. As Sabine Bauer-Amin, Leonardo Schiocchet and Maria Six-Hohenbalken have noted, tackling the complex political meshwork developing in Ventimiglia requires "[...] not only to acknowledge the complexity of a singular refugee regime, but also the plurality of intersecting contextual refugee regimes." (Bauer-Amin, Schiocchet, Six-Hohenbalken. 2022: 15). The involvement of all the actants is not constrained to a particular place of interaction but reaches beyond various spheres like *lines,* as Ingold suggested. And consequently, their interacting and thus their shaping is not limited to *one* assemblage but constitutes *various* assemblages.

Rather than snippets glued to a collage, the Passo presents itself as a painting by Jason Pollock with whom I seek to make peace at this late point of the debate: The colors in a Pollock painting are neither placed randomly nor are they insignificant fragments of a larger structure which only then achieves meaning when all components are finally aligned. Rather, the colors reference one another, mark distinctions, clash and converge. In doing so, they remain in motion—even as they are fixed on a finite canvas. They act upon the ground of the material and form the ground themselves. What emerges is a multitude of discrete scenes, and at the same time, a singular work. The beauty lies in both the aggression and the tenderness evolving simultaneously; or more precisely: in the *agency* emerging.

8. Conclusion

For sure, all these processes elaborated in this work converge in the production of a larger assemblage: the Passo della Morte. But this insight alone is, perhaps, too obvious and therefore rather unsatisfying. In the end, what we encounter here is not a unified body with organs working collectively toward a common goal, but a multiplicity of contradictory and antagonistic elements. These elements form discrete organisms and may simultaneously belong to multiple, conflicting systems. Within these systems, stasis and mobility, passivity and resistance may cooperate; or merely coexist. What emerges is not *one* collectively constructed site, but rather a proliferation of fluid and processual spaces, each of which carries different meanings, effects, affordances, and constraints. Activists and police, smugglers and migrants, humans and non-humans do not cooperatively build up one location but rather shape and inhabit a variety of environments which are named: Passo della Morte,

Sentiero della Speranza, Sentiero del Passo; or simply something like "*that path I heard of which leads across the border.*"

This renegotiation of values and norms must be understood as an act of resistance by those whose aims conflict with those of larger political formations; especially by those who, at first glance, appear to be but pawns in a game between state actors and institutions: the people in motion themselves. What is familiar becomes transformed and all certainties are displaced. The affective charge of the environment can thus be traced to the sense of estrangement that prevails at the Passo. One senses the magnitude of transformational processes initiated by both visible and invisible actors, and our trust in the familiar begins to falter.

The ambiguity of the Passo della Morte allows us to uphold the ideas of both Bruno Latour and Tim Ingold as simultaneously accurate. Actors are not merely components in the machinery of agency production; they also constitute independent lines in a wider weave, as Ingold would put it. Yet these threads cannot be grasped without attending to their interrelational entanglements; that is, without considering the broader context. And within this context, symmetry is rare. Rather, the interactions on the macro-level present themselves as a struggle over rights, power and freedom of movement, a struggle that encircles the globe and is rendered particularly acute here at the Passo della Morte. At the same time, we continue to engage with a physical border: one that imposes moments of immobilization on both bodies and objects. The border fence may remain materially manifest while nevertheless undergoing change; people may move and simultaneously dwell; things may transform and remain. The ambiguity of the border suggests that stasis and fluidity do not merely follow one another but can coexist simultaneously. The Passo della Morte, then, is not simply a path, but also a place; or, more precisely: it is many paths, and simultaneously many places.



Figure 39

9. References

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9.3. Interviews

Interview with Camilo: via Zoom call, Netherlands. 13.02.2025

Interview with Remon: via Zoom call, Chile. 16.02.2025

Interview with Toni: via Zoom call, Spain. 17.02.2025 (translated from German into English by the author)

Interview with Sarah and Corina: in person, Italy. 24.02.2025 (translated from German into English by the author)

Interview with BARNABÀ, Enzo: in person, Italy. 26.02.2025 (translated from French into English by the author)

9.4. Images

Figure 1 Photograph taken by the author. February 2021

Figure 2. Graphic taken from: VEZIANO, Paolo. 2016: *"Ein unkontrollierbarer Zustrom" - Jüdische Flüchtlinge an der italienisch-französischen Grenze 1938-1940*. In: ANDERL, Gabriele, USATY, Simon [Edit.]. 2016: Schleppen, Schleusen, Helfen - Flucht zwischen Rettung und Ausbeutung. Wien: Mandelbaum Verlag. Page: 224. Edited and translated by the author. June 2025

Figure 2. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 3. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 4. Photograph taken by an anonymous activist. February 2021

Figure 5. Photograph taken by an anonymous activist. February 2021

Figure 6. Photograph taken by an anonymous activist. February 2021

Figure 7. Photograph taken by an anonymous activist. February 2021

Figure 9. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 10. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 11. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 12. Photograph taken by an anonymous activist. February 2021

Figure 13. Photograph taken by an anonymous activist. February 2021

Figure 14. Photograph taken by the author. August 2023

Figure 15. Photograph taken by an anonymous activist. February 2021

Figure 16. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 17. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 18. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 19. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 20. Photograph taken by the author. August 2023

Figure 21. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 22. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 23. Photograph taken by Remon. August 2023

Figure 24. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 25. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 26. Photograph taken by the author. August 2023

Figure 27. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 28. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 29. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 30. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 31. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 32. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 33. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 34. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 35. Note drawn and copied by anonymous passeur. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 36. Map drawn by BARUCH, Robert. 1939.
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Figure 37. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 38. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025

Figure 39. Photograph taken by the author. February 2025